



Pilgrims & Strangers

Essays in Mennonite Brethren History



Edited by Paul Toews

**PERSPECTIVES ON
MENNONITE LIFE AND THOUGHT**

NO. 1

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**Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies
Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary
Fresno, California**



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Printing of these essays is made possible by the brothers William E. Dyck, Jack H. Dyck and David A. Dyck in memory of their father Reverend Wilhelm W. Dyck and grandfather Elder Wilhelm Isaak Dyck.

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INTRODUCTION

Mennonites are people on the move. We have wandered around the world in search of a place to call home. The places of European-American Mennonites are many: Holland, Prussia, Russia, Germany, Canada, United States, Paraguay and Brazil. There are few pieces of land that stay in Mennonite hands more than two or three generations. We are aliens and strangers. Our kingdom is not of this world. But we are also pilgrims knowing where the kingdom is. We take something of our self-understanding from the transient quality of life. Yet we also grow weary of the journey.

The history of pilgrims is that of beginnings and endings. In the movings there is energy and exhilaration. There is also anxiety and fear. There is the determination to preserve the old ways and the equal desire to conform to the new places. Pilgrim peoples are suspended between two cultures: the one rejected and the one being adopted. That status paradoxically accounts for both their strength and vulnerability. The determination to maintain distinctive ways and understandings amidst changing circumstances is certainly part of Mennonite Brethren history. We have preserved even when the way stations were harsh.

But we have also been vulnerable to the many host societies of our history. We have mistaken other peoples traditions for our own. We have sometimes thought that Mennonite faith was contained in German culture or in American middle class lifestyles. Even pilgrims want to be like others. Differences that make a difference are costly. We have tired of the cost of rejection, of being on the move, of the inferiority feelings that dominant societies subtly impose on minority groups. We have wanted to be good Russians, good Americans, and good Canadians.

Accommodation and resistance are the twin themes of many ethno-religious group histories. Ours is no exception. We are a separate people and we are not. We are Americans

and Canadians and we are not. We are the people of Washington and Ottawa and we are also the people of Hillsboro and Winkler. We wear our Mennonitism proudly and we hide it quickly. We invest much in Mennonite anniversaries, celebrations, and heritage centers that remind us of our past and we rush headlong into mainstream Canadian and American protestant culture. We share a common past and are uncertain whether we will share the same future. We have a sense of history and we suffer from historical amnesia. We know we have a rich theological heritage yet we have not always nourished it. We are part of a larger pattern of religious life that in the past several decades, in both its church programs and forms of personal spirituality, has been cut loose from historical roots and traditions.

Loosing a sense of direction is easy for a people on the move. Our movement has not only been geographical. We are a people that in a little over a hundred years have traversed social and cultural distinctions, political and ideological affiliations, and economic class boundaries. We have become a people of many races, nationalities, and lands. We are now a global church with the European-North American branch a minority.

Mennonite theologies are many and reflect the same movement. We have long debated whether our origins were pietistic or anabaptistic. Our theological history is that of centrifugal forces propelling us in so many directions that it is sometimes difficult to find the center.

Pilgrims and strangers frequently need to sort out their location and direction. One form of that sorting process is the backward glance to gain perspective on the distance travelled. The Mennonite Brethren have a preoccupation in the 1970s with understanding their one hundred year old pilgrimage. Indicators of a renewed historical consciousness are the publications of the General Conference Board of Christian Literature, the creation of the General Conference Historical Commission and the emergence of archival and Mennonite Brethren study centers in Winnipeg,

Hillsboro, and Fresno. While the focus is on understanding the historical experience the dialogue is about the relationship between past and present.

The publication of John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, in 1975, is the singularly significant event of this historical renaissance. It is the first officially authorized history of the Mennonite Brethren written in the English language. While there have been numerous histories of the tradition, none other is as comprehensive or analytical as Toews. He is clearly the Dean of Mennonite Brethren history.

The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies thought the publication of the book a significant occasion for further historical discussion and reflection. The essays of this book are the consequence. They were (with one exception) originally presented at the Symposium on Mennonite Brethren History held on the campus of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in May of 1975. They were one way to publicly acknowledge the significance of John A. Toews' work and simultaneously extend the dialogue about Mennonite Brethren history.

The papers were either direct responses to John A. Toews or they used *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* as a starting point for analysis. Like the book they center on the Russian and North American Mennonite Brethren world. The essays in Section I are more direct responses to the Toews history. Both Frank Epp and Delbert Wiens are interested in the ways religious history can be conceptualized. They comment on the Toews way and offer alternative approaches. John B. Toews and C. J. Dyck break new ground in Mennonite historiography by their analysis of the Mennonite Brethren beginnings in Russia in 1860. The nature and inspiration for that beginning has long been of interest to Mennonite scholars. These essays by more clearly relating 1860 to other beginnings in Anabaptist history and to the Russian Mennonite world of the mid-nineteenth century considerably enhance our under-

standing of the denominations's origin.

Clarence Hiebert and J. B. Toews explore the relationship of Mennonite Brethren to other evangelical movements and denominational traditions, to the American environment, and the impact of these interrelationships on Mennonite theology and self-understanding. Notions of Mennonite exceptionality are certainly tested by these papers. Both show rather clearly the significant impact of other religious groups on a people known for their religious and cultural separation.

The last two essays juxtapose the Mennonite Brethren vision with present day Mennonite reality. Both authors point to the disjuncture between the vision and the reality, but both are also hopeful that the vision is appropriate for our times.

These essays point to the many sides of the Mennonite Brethren. They reveal theological, cultural, and political diversity. They point to the doubleness of Mennonite Brethren life: the faithful pilgrim and the accommodating stranger.

They also point to a transformation in Mennonite Brethren historical writing. They clearly move away from the dominant American Mennonite historiographic preoccupation with institutional, doctrinal, structural, and formal history to one that is culturally, sociologically, and ethnically oriented. They place the history of our people in the context of the larger cultural milieu. They contextualize Mennonite Brethren life. That contextualization may be troubling for it does suggest that even at the valued points of our experience and identity we do take cues, styles, and theologies from the social context. The tradition's commitment to biblicism, which is a recurring theme of these essays, has to be matched by an understanding of its moorings in culture. Gaining this cultural/historical perspective is critical for achieving a clearer self-understanding.

Mennonite Brethren history is moving from what has previously been called church history to something called

religious history. It moves from the confines of Mennonite institutions to the search for the Mennonite experience. It searches for the way Mennonite faith has diffused itself throughout Mennonite life and thought. It shifts the focus from church history to people history, from structures to peoplehood. It allows us to more clearly see the relationship of our religious experience to our cultural experience.

The publication of these essays would not have been possible without the assistance of several people. The *Christian Leader* kindly permitted the reprinting of the essay by John E. Toews. The essay included here is different from the one he presented at the Symposium. Phyllis Vanderhoof typed the manuscript and prepared it for printing. She did so with sureness and unfailing spirit. Wilfred Martens gave the essays the benefit of his good grammatical judgement. Doreen Ewert assisted in proof-reading.

I

THE SHAPES OF MENNONITE BRETHREN HISTORY

KEEPING BODY AND SOUL TOGETHER IN CHURCH HISTORY

Frank H. Epp

I

My first task is to define what is meant by the soul and the body of the church in history. By soul we simply mean the real life of the church, its spiritual essence, or its true self expressed in thoughts, attitudes, relations, and deeds. The body is the social vehicle or the social context expressed in time and space which gives the soul the flesh to become incarnate in history. The body can be defined very narrowly or quite broadly. The body is both the institution(s) of the denomination as well as the total environment to which the church relates. The latter may be defined as the whole of culture in a given period of history and/or in a given geographic area. It may, on the other hand, be limited to various contexts of the larger Christian church to which the denomination is related: all the "Christian churches," or all the protestants, or all the evangelicals, or all the Mennonites.

This paper will assume that a credible history must bring body and soul together on at least some level. It will further suggest that the larger the bodily framework, the greater is the potential for a really good history, provided the soul is seen as a truly integrated part of the framework.

II

Keeping the body and soul together has been as problematic in church history, if not more so, as it has been in the theology of the church. Whenever theology failed to acknowledge the relation or to achieve integration between body and soul, history tended to follow the patterns of life and thought that had been set. But even where theology was holistic, we have not always been able to put it all together. Indeed, church historians have even failed to ac-

knowledge the integrated experience brought about from without by the sociological conditions of the world or from within by the psychological inclinations of man.

Sociological conditions are those situations where the external environment overcame the church. Quite frequently in history the state and the surrounding society have happily incorporated the church into their life as a useful institution and as necessary social cement. Psychological inclinations are the internal environments of the church, which needed for its soul an external reference point. Again, not infrequently this need of the church has been met in a response to the culture surrounding it (be it the Mennonite colony commonwealth or the American nation), which became flesh and form for the soul.

The result of both sociological and psychological tendencies was more a civil religion than a Christian *ekklesia*; but be that as it may, the church historian who discovers that the bringing together of body and soul has produced a civil religion is the better historian for reporting and analyzing it. For him, the soul of religion does not appear in a social vacuum. He has recognized that the true soul of the church cannot be portrayed historically without some form of incarnation.

III

At least two major facts have militated against a profound analysis of the body-soul relationships in the history of the church. The one is theological, the other institutional. A particular theological problem has arisen from "the separation of church and state." Whereas the doctrine originally meant that the state had no authority over religion and the conscience of man, it came to mean that the church had no business in the affairs of the state and, to the largest extent, in the affairs of society. Sunday was separated from Monday, religion from business and leisure, and the personal gospel from the social gospel. In the process the soul was separated from the body. The re-

sult was a perception of the church with a rather fragmented, if not completely malformed, body. The consequences for historiography were tragic deformities of all kinds, not least was the failure to realize that the soul will be incarnated, if not in theologically "correct" patterns, then in heretical forms.

The North American institutional phenomenon known as the denomination has also side-tracked the ordinary church historian from real church history. On the one hand, it prevented him from properly describing and analyzing domesticated or civil religion and, on the other hand, from uncovering whatever prophetic religion (meaning real encounter between a vital church and a decadent society) there may have been.

The denominational institution(s) had so much form and substance of their own and placed so much demand on the spiritual energy of the church that historians could easily limit the body of the church to those institutions. The tendency to limit the history of the church to the church structures was helped along by the secular historians whose perception of the human story was likewise truncated. More often than not they too failed to recognize not only the significant historical presence of the church institutions but also the powerful social influence of the religious idea. There are exceptions to the rule, of course, and more and more histories are being written that have more to say about man than the marching of armies and the parade of kings.

In defense of the church historian, it can be said that his task often was to fill in the missing pieces left by the secular chronicles, to complete the human puzzles. However, historical gaps are not filled by writing missing parts in isolation, even if the parts are legion. If the pegs of the historical landscape do not fit the holes, the histories remain incomplete.

The problem of the denominational historian is amplified as he dissects his own institutions ever so many times

into ever so many parts without ever finding those parts in their unity. The readers of history then are like that group of blind commentators on the elephant, each of whom had a good feel for either the leg, or the tail, or the trunk, or the side, but none of whom had any idea of the whole elephant. And history itself becomes like Ezekiel's valley of dry, widely scattered and unconnected, bones. The chapters of history may, in the nature of encyclopaedias, collect these bones into piles, but the question still remains: Can these bones live? Will they take on flesh? And is a spirit alive in that flesh?

IV

Knowing J.A. Toews, his personality, his theology, and his grasp of the historian's task, I felt assured that we would get from him not only disconnected bones, but flesh and spirit; and not only spirituality, but, in a very real sense, the pilgrimage of a people in this world and through this world, trying to reshape that world in the image of God's kingdom. I must confess that I was somewhat taken aback when the very first page of the book bounced these words back at me:

Church renewal and new life movements cannot be explained simply in terms of an historical framework of cause and effect. An understanding of events in redemptive and religious history requires more than an analysis or evaluation of social, cultural, or economic conditions in the context of which these events occurred (p. 31).

In the first place, it wasn't clear with which of the previous histories or historians he was arguing. Secondly, I said to myself, momentarily conceding his point, that an understanding of events indeed requires "more than an analysis or evaluation of social, cultural, or economic conditions in the context of which these events occurred." But the "more" must be an additive, not a substitute. It is true for believers that the Lord of the church is above

and beyond history, but it does not follow that the church is outside of that history, not before a renewal, not during it, and not after it. Fortunately, for my continued friendship with Toews, his text revealed an abundance of connecting points, where in his analysis, the body and soul of the church came together. Let me cite a few examples from the first part of the book in the chronological order of their appearance:

The growing pressure of Prussian militarism under Frederick the Great made it increasingly difficult for the non-resistant Mennonites to remain loyal to their convictions (p. 14).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the far-sighted land settlement policy of Catherine II of 'All the Russians' (as expressed in the Manifesto of 1763) was interpreted by many Mennonites as a special manifestation of divine providence (p. 14).

Economic conditions also played a decisive role in shaping the social and religious life of the colonies (p. 18).

Given these geographical, political, economic, and social conditions, it is not surprising that religious life and ethical practices gradually declined (pp. 18-19).

This low level of morals and spirituality cannot simply be explained in terms of socio-economic conditions described earlier (p. 19).

Hence the stage was set for a Mennonite spiritual and cultural exclusivism, and for the development of a territorial church (*Landeskirche*) in which church membership and citizenship were coextensive. Although the elders and ministers continued to be orthodox in their views of salvation and the nature of the church, in practice they began to surrender or compromise basic biblical principles. A serious 'credibility gap' developed between formal confession and actual practice. In many instances baptism seemed to be more a civil than a religious rite, since it enabled young people to get married (pp. 20-21).

Between 1820 and 1850 the Mennonites of South

Russia went through a kind of *Kulturkampf* of their own (p. 23).

The fact that the ministers and elders belonged almost exclusively to the wealthier class of the landed farmers, added a tragic dimension to this problem (p. 23).

Wuest was an outstanding preacher: tall, good physique, endowed with a powerful, melodious voice, and well trained in the art of communication. He had an attractive, winsome personality, but also strong Christian convictions, and people who had contact with him either loved him or hated him—depending on their attitude toward Christ (p. 30).

It is important, however, to see this religious ferment in its social, historical, and theological context in order to understand it properly (p. 51).

That the Mennonite Brethren did not chiefly belong to the landless group can be seen from a resolution of the church which stipulated that members should abstain from any involvement on either side of the landless-landowner conflict. Thus it would appear that although economic conditions may have contributed to the religious restlessness of that period, their primary significance cannot be established (p. 52).

The spiritual ferment in the early Mennonite Brethren movement is closely connected with several questions related to the organization and practice of the church (p. 52).

The two decades following the period of storm and stress (1860-65) were marked, on the one hand, by increased stabilization and maturity in the inner life and organizational structure of the Mennonite Brethren Church, and on the other by rapid growth and expansion into new geographical areas. This is the period in which the "landless problem" was finally solved by the division of crown lands and the purchase of large tracts of land for daughter colonies (p. 69).

This is also the period in which the earlier isolation of the Mennonite Brethren from the rest of the Mennonites, as well as their withdrawal from public affairs, comes to an end. Increasingly Mennonite Brethren become involved often in positions of leadership,

in the socio-economic and cultural life of the larger Mennonite community (p. 86).

The winds of change that affected all social and political structures in the Russian empire after the abortive revolution of 1905, also influenced inter-Mennonite relationships, although indirectly (p. 102).

The assassination of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo on that day triggered off a series of events: war, revolution, terror, famine, emigration, deportation, and suffering unprecedented in modern history. These events also shook the religious and economic foundations of Mennonite life in the Russian Empire (p. 106).

A group of young men, including Dyck, organized a society for the distribution of Gospels, New Testaments, and tracts among the Russian soldiers. Dyck hailed the March Revolution (1917) as the dawn of a new day of religious freedom and of new missionary opportunities (p. 117).

This portrayal of the Mennonite Brethren soul in context with given periods of time and in specific areas of space not only makes the history more dramatic and interesting but it also makes the history more true. What is true in the portrait of personalities is true also in the characterization of a people. Let me cite an example with reference to Evangelist Wuest (p. 30). We are told first that "he had come to a genuine experience of forgiveness of sins and a joyous assurance of salvation" and secondly, that he "was an outstanding preacher: tall, good physique, endowed with a powerful, melodious voice, and well trained in the art of communication. He had an attractive, winsome, personality, but also strong Christian convictions . . . people . . . either loved him or hated him." The latter comment is more revealing about the man than is the former. One needs more than an abstraction to touch the soul. Historically, soul appears only in the earthen vessel of the body.

So it is with the whole church. By seeing the church in the eras of reform and revolution, by identifying both

the loves and the hates, and by describing its life and death struggles, we experience the soul of the church bodily. All the related institutional data is necessary and useful, but it is only a fraction of the church's body.

V

Also in the second section the author tries to reveal the soul. Let me cite some specific examples:

It should be remembered that for the Mennonites a primary motive for leaving Russia was the desire to preserve the principle of nonresistance which was threatened by the Imperial Decree of 1870 (p. 130).

The history of the founding, growth, and development of all M. B. congregations in North America transcend the purpose of this book. The following representative local congregations reflect economic, social, cultural, and religious trends or problems of earlier and later periods in Mennonite Brethren history (p. 133).

For many of these pilgrims who had gone through the wilderness experience of war, revolution, famine, confiscation of property and the restriction of religious freedom, Canada appeared to be in a very literal sense the 'promised land,' and so they affectionately called it 'Canaan' (p. 152).

In retrospect it would appear that a certain 'cultural narrowness,' although sincerely motivated, may have been one of the factors that retarded the expansion of the group through the years. Paradoxically enough, this ethical conservatism was combined with an exemplary zeal in evangelism and missions which found expression in the founding of charitable institutions and in the commissioning of workers of many areas of the world (p. 185).

In 1924 the conference gave expression to its conviction that relief and social concern are an integral part of its mission by electing a seven-member relief committee. This was the birth of the Board of General Welfare and Public Relations which took its legitimate place alongside the Board of Foreign Missions

and other boards of the Mennonite Brethren Conference (pp. 204-205).

Cultural pressures and spiritual needs of congregations in an urban environment precipitated many changes, including changes in the role and function of the ministry (p. 308).

A changing culture demands a periodic reevaluation of the Christian response to various social, economic, and political issues (p. 323).

It would thus appear, that as congregations become more 'acculturated,' they are increasingly tempted to surrender their spiritual heritage and their confessional identity. There is a greater pressure in the urban environment to conform to the common ethical norms and practices of the community, or of other churches (pp. 334-335).

The relationship between the profession of a 'left-wing' Reformation theology and the adherence to a 'right-wing' political philosophy needs further examination and study (p. 345).

As Christians who give their primary allegiance to Jesus Christ and his kingdom, Mennonite Brethren can make one of their greatest contributions to state and society through intercessory prayer and ministries of compassion (p. 360).

The search of the early Brethren for biblical patterns and principles for the fellowship of believers did not occur in a theological vacuum, however, but in a definite church-related and historical context (p. 362).

However, in some areas this 'spirit' has weakened the structure and has led to a lack of emphasis on Christian discipleship, church ordinances and social concerns (p. 366).

In the past (and in some churches in the present) this evangelistic emphasis has not always been properly related to social concerns. Mennonite Brethren have occasionally been charged with being indifferent to the material needs of men. They were interested, critics have said, in saving souls, not in saving people (p. 373).

As a result of socio-economic conditions described

in Part One, Mennonite Brethren cooperated with the 'churchly' Mennonites in public education, general welfare, and alternative service (p. 381).

Great and revolutionary changes have taken place in India since the country achieved independence in 1947. A rising nationalism and opposition to foreign influence have also affected the pattern of M.B. missionary involvement in India. In God's providence these winds of change have aided in the indigenization of the M.B. Church in that country (p. 404).

Slowly the rebels were pushed back by government forces. The national church went through a period of reorientation and repentance since some members had participated in this movement of militant nationalism (p. 415).

At a large rally in Filadelfia in July, 1966, 'Johann Giesbrecht,' one of the first Lengua converts, gave this testimony: 'The Mennonites have not only brought the gospel to us; they have also shown us a whole new way of life' (p. 425).

In 1958 a new day dawned for evangelical missions in Columbia when the Liberal party came into office in the national elections. The persecution had proved to be a blessing in disguise, purifying the Christian churches and changing the course of national politics (p. 436).

This section reveals a handicap not present in the first section. It is primarily due to a change in the organizational scheme. Instead of moving the church as a whole chronologically through the struggles in given historical situations, the author chooses a series of relevant topics, usually institutionally oriented, and then traces those particular institutional histories, usually over the full period of 115 years.

All of this is comprehensively, reliably, and interestingly done. The author recognizes the struggle of the soul with the principalities and powers and that body and soul are indeed inter-related. However, it is generally left to the reader to try to understand what the whole church was like in given periods of time, as for instance the war, inter-

war, and post-war periods. Without the chronological organization it is almost impossible to see the parts within the whole.

VI

Even with this criticism, however, our author has taken a major step forward in the contextual writing of history, complete with the most essential raw institutional data. Future historians—he surely will himself be one of them—will build on this foundation. For the most part they will be free to do the analytical exercise, the chore of the data-gathering having to the largest extent been completed. That exercise, as difficult as the first, will lead to the following considerations:

1) Attempts to more clearly integrate Mennonite Brethren history around a central theme or themes will emerge. In our emphasis on the need for body, we must not overlook the need for a single soul in the form of a dominant theme. Unity begins not with the body but with the soul. Author Toews has already identified one of the most plausible themes when he says: "A survey of conference periodicals, yearbooks, and other literature leads one to the conclusion that no other subject has received as much attention among Mennonite Brethren as missions and evangelism" (p. 373).

In the light of this fact, and given the title of the book, it is somewhat jarring to discover that the younger churches are treated largely as an appendix. Even the statistical overview, immediately following, ignores them. Apart from this treatment of the younger churches (numerically the larger part of the church), the author recognizes the mission theme throughout but usually departs from it as a center or as a stream along which the whole Mennonite Brethren movement in the last century of world history might be perceived.

2) The search for a vigorous interaction between the spirit of the age and the spirit of the church will be more

persistent. Very significant changes have come to the church in the North American environment. In fact, as the old separation and isolation disappeared, the new Mennonite synthesis, including that of the Mennonite Brethren, assimilated many outside influences of all kinds. This type of body-soul togetherness must become more evident in later histories of the church.

3) More meaningful identification of historical periods will be required. Since the spirit of the age must be identified in terms of cultural phenomenon in given periods (i.e. roaring twenties, depression, war, television, Vietnam, energy, mass evangelism), an attempt should be made to discover the total spirit or soul of the church in terms of such periods. In the writing of history, one must find the right balance between the length and the breadth of a particular treatment. One can make the time period too short and a topic too broad, but I am sure that 115 years is too long a time and "publishing" (to give one example) too narrow a topic to stretch out a century and still get real history out of it.

4) Institutional dynamics will be more carefully studied. Institutional history itself is not to be rejected. On the contrary, to ignore it would be to leave an important part of the body untouched and church history incomplete. But history, if it is to be more than an encyclopaedia, must deal with institutional dynamics lest the soul of the church appear to be dead. Future historians can take this into account.

5) Religious movements are idea-movements. The author has written the theological history of the church with broad strokes. Building on this foundation, future historians can and will probe the many ideological and ethical cross-currents that have affected the Mennonite Brethren historical experience. Here again, the significance of the soul in historical body-soul relationship becomes apparent.

Thus, we see that the historian who would keep body and soul together must look not only outward for the

visible forms but also inward for a more profound understanding of the spiritual essence. But he may not look in any one direction alone, or for too long, because the phenomena which he must understand and integrate are many and varied. Actually, no single historian can grasp it all in one undertaking or even in a lifetime, and this is why history is a demanding, though delightful, never-ending process.

INCARNATION AND IDEAL THE STORY OF A TRUTH BECOMING HERESY

Delbert Wiens

In the Preface to *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, J.A. Toews mentioned that "In the initial planning of this history several consultations were held with members of the executive of the Board of Christian Literature and others interested in the project." I was one of the "interested others" in those consultations and participated in a debate whether *church* or *people* was to be the organizing focus for this history. Was this to be the account of a way of life or of a denomination? Which was more central to our self-understanding: ethos and ethnicity or doctrine and institutions? The title of the book indicates the decision that was made.

I was on the losing side perhaps partly because it was not entirely clear to me what I was defending and why. Since then, I have come to believe that J.A. Toews and the Board made the only possible decision. This book, or something very like it, had to be written first. We have not had an up-to-date, systematic statement that codifies the events of our public history and expresses our self-understanding.

This book records the initial struggle of the early brethren to define themselves over against others from whom they were separating themselves and yet not quite separating themselves. One aspect of that struggle was the need to define an idea and an ideal. The other aspect involved the still-continuing effort to create institutions to embody and recommend this ideal by which they wished to define themselves. Both of these aspects constitute the collective face we presented, and still present, to the outside world. They are what makes us "public," and as such, they are the "official" truth about ourselves. Insofar as we "appear" in the world, it is by these things that we wish to be known. And it is by these things, in large part, that we

wish to know ourselves.

But I have become more than ever convinced of a second thing: those of us who were confusedly trying to identify the non-public, unofficial reality were right about its importance. If we are to understand ourselves, we must also become clear about the "inner face," the side that is pointed to by words like *ethos* and *ethnic*. We must do so for two reasons. On the one hand, too great a concentration on the public face can unwittingly speed the decay of the private sphere which nourishes it. On the other, it may be that the parts we are officially silent about turn out to deserve the greater honor.

I gladly express appreciation to J.A. Toews for his book. I have already learned much from it and expect to learn more. It has helped me to see the way we have seen ourselves. And it has helped me to clarify for myself that our vision is inadequate. What we have here is only half the story.

It may be that my comments will distress the writer. I know that they distress me. The primary criticism, however, is directed at the reality of what we are more and more coming to be and at what we think, not at the book that reports and represents that reality. I have never believed in shooting the messenger who reveals sometimes unwittingly the bad news, especially not when his account also reveals so much of the good news of God's presence in our midst. I do, however, wish to argue for the hidden half and to look at the connection between the public and the private spheres. How does the ideological-institutional relate to the sociological-economic? It may be that their relationship needs to be reconceived. The discussion follows some assumptions that seem to illuminate the problem.

1. The Mennonite Brethren Ideal

1.1. One part of our official description of ourself is the description of an ideal. We Mennonite Brethren have traditionally defined ourselves as a church which is made up

of individuals who have joined on the basis of a genuine experience of personal conversion and who then live by elevated moral principles while striving constantly to witness to the lost. To enhance our fellowship within we have developed a polity that avoids the extremes of congregationalism and of hierarchicalism. We have built institutions to carry out our educational, evangelistic, and caring missions. And we have done all of this out of reverent obedience to the Scriptures, the sole and final authority for the purity of our doctrine and the rectitude of our lives.

1.2. Our ideal as the description of our reality is partly honest. Knowledge of the ideal of a people is necessary for understanding that people. That such an ideal is not reached does not constitute hypocrisy so long as we say to ourselves and to others that we possess it as the ideal toward which we strive. And, in time, we do tend to become what we talk about, some more so than others.

1.3. Our ideal as the description of our reality is partly hypocritical. Individually, very few of us are so deluded as to believe that we have realized the ideal. No congregation would claim it of itself. And yet it seems to me that we have often pretended that our collective self is accurately described by the ideals we individually honor while knowing our failure to attain them. To match our ideal we have constructed an idealized image of the Mennonite Brethren as the true church. And that is dishonest. Or, believing that either our ideal or our partial attainment of it is better than that of others, we have smugly pretended that at least the Mennonite Brethren are truer than other churches.

2. An Excursus: On the Natural History of Ideals

2.1. Though each of the individual elements of a coherent ideal may have its own history, they coalesce and emerge suddenly as components of a new world-view. It is always misleading to explain a new world-view in terms of its component parts. What is new is the mode of compre-

hending them, the stance from which they are all seen as in a new light. A world-view is not so much a collection of ideas as it is a way of seeing everything.

2.2. Every world-view is abstracted from a part of reality that is treated as revelatory of the whole of reality. A good deal of recent scholarly work has gone into the discovery and description of the bases for alternate world-views. (Here I am mostly indebted to H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, and Stephen Pepper, *World Hypotheses*.) When a part of reality is treated as revelatory of the whole, that part functions as a metaphor which guides the interpretation of the whole. Although there are many variations, there are only a few basic metaphors.

Most, if not all, primitive cultures treat the aspect of will as revelatory of the whole. From the fact that human acts are willed acts, such people posit that all actions are willed by personal beings. An animistic world-view is a logical extension of this assumption. When the will of the gods came to be expressed and written down as laws, a different sort of world-view had emerged. Especially in Greece the aspect of fabrication, the metaphor of the tool, or, more broadly, of man-the-maker became important.

I do not intend here to describe the basic world-views and the metaphors on which they are based. The above are given for their illustrative value. Nor do I intend to reproduce what I tried to do in my essay "From the Village to the City: A Grammar for the Languages We Are" (*Direction*, October 1973). However flawed it may be, I think that essay demonstrates the importance of this mode of analysis for understanding Mennonite history.

2.3. Every new world-view both reveals and hides reality, and it releases much energy. Whenever one adopts a new way to see, one is able to recognize what had not previously "been there," and one sees even familiar things in a new way. Because some problems can now be solved that could not be solved before, a tremendous burst of creative energy is released in those who grasp the new. But every

world-view blinds men to those aspects of reality that it does not reveal. An animistic world-view limits technological advances, for the way to influence events is more through the bending of wills (magic) than the making of things (technology). On the other hand, a technological society has no logical place for psychic reality, as was realized by the "God is Dead" theologians.

2.4. Every coherent world-view, when fully realized, destroys the culture that adopts it. What is truly revealed by every world-view is true. But because this partial truth pretends to be the whole truth, it is incapable of maintaining a balanced order. Developed technological societies are especially notorious for upsetting the balance of nature and the psychic health of their citizens. Thus the truth of any world-view comes in the end to function as heresy. So long as the new idea is incompletely realized and is in tension with other world-views, its demonic tendencies are held in check and may not be noticed.

2.5. Every developed culture struggles to express its world view in the form of ideas. These ideas may then become fixed dogmatic ideologies. Every ideology is an idolatry.

3. A New World-View for Russian Mennonites

3.1. Another part of our description of ourself is an account of how our ideal was discovered and developed. This part of our story has been much debated, and it is either foolishness or bravery for one as little versed in the accounts as I am to suggest how this part of our story is to be understood. Here also, much of what I know (and guess) comes from reading the lines (and between the lines) that J.A. Toews has penned.

3.2. Though they had been known earlier among the Prussian Mennonites, the basic elements of the modern Western world-view had begun to surface among Russian Mennonites in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. As Toews points out on page 23, "the Mennonites of

South Russia went through a kind of *Kulturkampf* of their own" between 1820 and 1850. This rationalistic, technological version of man-the-maker received its ultimate character from the "revelation" of the machines and of the factory lines that produced them. But at first it was probably received in Russia as a methodology for large-scale business and land management. Thus Johann Cornies may be a clearer indicator of its meaning than the early religious stirrings.

The successful religious application of this new way of seeing apparently came later than the initial revelation of its economic meaning, perhaps because the religious leaders mostly remained bound by those more traditional patterns to which they owed their position. (This does not imply that new socio-economic structures necessarily prece-de new religious understandings. Both are related to the emergence of an underlying idea. The true causes are hidden and they manifest themselves in all spheres.) Also related, though perhaps more logically secondary, was a new sense of confidence and a great outpouring of energy.

3.3. Although the early Mennonite Brethren display the confusions that would be expected of a nascent world-view, the movement can best be understood as the religious expression of this emerging consciousness. This may account for the high percentage of teachers who were active in the movement. One would expect them to be among the first to understand and appreciate this vision. It might also explain the early and continuing emphasis on rational organizational structures. The individualistic emphases of Pietism also find their logical place within such a construction.

The large presence of the poor and of the *Fröhliche Richtung* in what is being described as essentially a bourgeois movement is partially a contradiction, but it can be explained. Every important new vision releases great energy and enthusiasm and tends to break up older patterns. The poor Mennonites would welcome the breaking

apart of the structures that kept them in near-servitude. And many of them, in their ignorance, would identify the emotion released by the new thing with the thing itself. In any case, the real leaders moved almost too successfully to stamp out emotionalism and to channel the new energy into more productive behavior. More revelatory, and more significant for the long run, was the mood that J.A. Toews caught in the following paragraph (p. 70). The quotation he inserted is from P.M. Friesen.

The worship services of the Mennonite Brethren underwent a marked change during this period [1865-1885]. The earlier pietistic emphasis on informal sharing and devotional talks gave way to an emphasis on more systematic teaching and preaching. The members of the congregations seemed to be 'hungry for order! order! and for lectures!' This change was accompanied by a change in language . . . from the Low German dialect to High German in the public worship service One of the most popular and powerful preachers of this new era was Christian Schmidt, whom the Brethren affectionately called 'our Wuest' or 'our Spurgeon.'

3.4. This world-view was held in creative tension with older organic and inter-relational world-views. The development of institutions and systematic doctrinal teaching was necessarily built upon an older Russian Mennonite community structure that embodied the wisdom of the soil and of the "village." The strong emphasis on brotherhood and fellowship cannot be understood on the basis of the new vision. These older communal emphases received strengthening whenever there was struggle, either the struggle with those who tried to destroy them or the struggle to begin again as pioneers on new frontiers.

Despite the initial opposition from the threatened Mennonite leadership, the attempts to destroy the Brethren were always halfhearted. The Brethren, in flawed form, represented the crystallization of a movement that was general through the colonies. Many who did not wish to join them were secret sympathizers. Before long, the new atti-

tude penetrated the older churches. But the initial opposition, as well as continuing tensions, strengthened the communal sense that tended to hold in check the gradual pull away from communal to the utilitarian structures implied in the man-the-maker vision.

From this point of view, the emigration to North America presented a different sort of complexity. On the one hand, it represented a reactionary development. Those who came were, on the whole, those who had less clearly assimilated the new structures. To be blunt, a disproportionate number of the early emigrants were those who had not been able to succeed in Russia. Their claim to be seeking relief from military service may have been a way of expressing disenchantment with the speed of cultural advance among the Mennonites in Russia. In the new world, they separated between those who wished a complete return to older communal structures (largely Old Colony emigrants to Canada) and those who had basically accepted the new vision but needed a slower pace for its development.

The conditions of the frontier further reinforced a clan-type solidarity. (The earlier emigration from Prussia to Russia developed the same patterns). A fair number who came were also hoping to escape Mennonite communalism altogether. However, the Mennonite Brethren communities that developed in the midwest exhibited characteristics in some respects more like the earlier nineteenth century Russian scene than like the one they had just left. And they tended to lag behind their Russian brethren culturally and theologically until the destruction of the Russian colonies. This was one source of the tension between those who came before and those who came after the Russian Revolution.

On the other hand, the freedom of the frontier, the dispersion of their settlements, the break-up of the village pattern, and the growing desire of many to assimilate to the American way made it possible for the new world-view

to develop in purer form than would have been possible in Russia. Thus we have tended more and more to move toward utilitarian social structures. This development makes it possible for us now to see more clearly the inner meaning of our basic point of view, one that was also working itself out in American culture as a whole.

4. Different philosophies and theologies may be derived from the man-the-maker metaphor. I will attempt a very broad characterization of them and show some parallels to our religious situation.

4.1. Aristotle has provided a classical description of the aspects, or "causes," that apply to this sort of world-view. When a person sets out to make something, there is (1) a mental plan, (2) some material to work on, (3) the agent that does the work, and (4) the purpose for which the object was created. The popular application of this to the universe was as follows. There is a rational, natural order comprised of the Laws of Nature. These laws can be deduced by the rational mind which systematically "reads the book of Nature." These laws are absolutes and can be absolutely known. There is also matter which is composed, ultimately, of lifeless atoms which are in constant motion. By tapping into the energy of the universe, rational beings can apply the laws to matter, reorganizing nature to serve their purpose.

4.2. Most philosophical systems can be classified according to which of these aspects are considered primary. Those philosophers who emphasized the absolute character of the laws and the presumed capacity of the mind to know them developed idealisms, assuming the really real to be mental in character. Those who were impressed by the material basis of things developed materialisms, believing that there is no reality except that which appears in space and time. Some others, reacting against these, assumed that energy is basic and developed vitalistic theories.

Other world-views can produce other types of philo-

sophical understanding. The thought world of the Old Testament, for example, does not fit into what has here been described. Scepticism and humanism also require special treatment. Indeed, scepticisms tend to be the end result among those who observe that when any given system is fully worked out, it tends to break down and, paradoxically, to turn into its opposite.

4.3. To the extent that we Mennonite Brethren have adopted the man-the-maker world-view, our official thinking parallels the popular and philosophical divisions just described. And, unfortunately, our acting tends to follow our theologizing.

4.3.1. The new world-view, the scriptures, and theology. Our insistence on the final authority of Scriptures only seems to be the same as the universal Christian recognition that they are one of God's great gifts to the Church. In actuality this insistence is based on the demand that there be a "revelation" of spiritual laws that parallels the "revelation" of natural laws. Corresponding to the rational natural order there is a spiritual order, the absolute laws of which can be absolutely known and can be deduced by the rational mind (the theologian) which systematically "reads the book of super-nature" (the Bible). But, as in nature, those laws are hidden; and the theologian, like the scientist, must sift through the chaotically given to reconstruct the logical order of the thoughts of God. The aim is a systematic theology that structurally resembles the *Geometry* of Euclid and the *Principia* of Newton.

Unfortunately for man-the-maker, no single systematic, either for the scientist or for the theologian, has proved adequate. For awhile we could hope that either Arminianism or Calvinism or some synthesis of the two could be the Truth. We now know better. Any simple systematic must forever be disputable.

Since we have been unable to discover the coherent set of propositions which we sought in the Scriptures, we have fallen back upon the demand for a specific attitude on

them. With modern evangelicalism, we are left with the assertion that Scripture is the sort of revelation that makes it possible for us to discover the system that we have not yet been able to find and to agree on. For this reason, our defense of the Scripture grows increasingly paranoid.

This anxiety, however, is not really the result of concern *for* the Scriptures, nor are we really comforted that Christians continue to be nourished *by* them. What is at stake is the threat to our world-view and to ourselves. Insofar as this world-view becomes dominant, the Scriptures become both irrelevant and an idol we worship. Having been challenged and inspired by the study of several Bible passages conducted by a Bible teacher at a retreat, one of our brothers expressed his enthusiasm to another. The other responded, "Well, that's true, but we don't really know what his attitude is *on* the Scriptures, do we." Many of us have become more concerned with the shibboleths that guard the bridges to our world-view than with a genuine concern to understand the Bible. Others of us who live out of different world-views do not entirely share this problem and the Scriptures can continue to nourish our souls and shape our lives.

We can no longer pretend that our identity and our unity is granted by a formalism, by a coherent set of propositions that represent The Truth and The Ideal. Nor can it be given by an attitude to the Bible as its presumed source. It is also unrealistic to try to forge that unity and focus around a sense of mission and the institutions that were built to serve it.

4.3.2. The new world-view, the sense of mission, and our institutions. The new vision brought enormous joy and freedom. The old frustrations and pressures had been transcended. A new world could now be built, and our elders had every confidence that they could build it. This enthusiasm for an ideal which had been accepted without yet having been fully understood led them to create churches and satellite institutions to propagate and develop that

ideal. They were artists, and their medium was the living structures of life itself. Small wonder that they had little time for "the arts."

But the energy released by their discovery was not the same as the energy demanded by the thing that they created. To create is not the same as to maintain production. Even conversion is a quite different sort of thing for those who experience it as the freeing, exhilarating, discovery of a new world-view than it is for those of us who experience it as forgiveness and the rededication to what we have always been taught. Lacking the joy of a refocusing and the energy of the creator, we must increasingly chastise ourselves to work up the will to maintain the institutions and to "witness." Moreover, the institutions are themselves products of that world-view, and they are not much more secure than is the vision that brought them forth.

In keeping with the "maker" metaphor, these creations have been increasingly justified as enterprising in the business of the Lord. And that business was increasingly narrowed to the production of converts. Thus evangelism came to be seen as the final reason for our existence as a denomination and as the focus of our identity. But there seems to be little other reason for conversion than to become a part of the production of more converts. And so, like modern economics, the things produced become secondary to the overriding need to keep production moving. The process itself has become its reason for existence.

Like the worker chained to his job and dreaming of self-fulfillment during a long retirement in Florida, we can imagine fulfillment only as far away and a long time coming. The Kingdom is in no sense here. It is all yet to come. And so there grows out of the wish for its nearness a fascination with the eschaton, and we become dispensationalists whose tremendous need to know all the futuristic details is a sorry substitute for the joy of living in the at least partial presence of that Kingdom now.

4.3.3. The new world-view and our polity. Finally, to

complete this inventory of our ideals (see 1.1) from the viewpoint of man-the-maker, the contradictions built into our church polity can be illuminated by similar contradictions in that world-view. Just as its ultimate element of nature is the atom-in-motion, so its presupposition for society is the individual man-in-the-state-of-nature. Just as atoms coalesce into material structures, so individuals contract together to form societies. The basic reason for societies is to provide a context for the individual to seek freely "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Yet in forming the social contract we forfeit all but the most basic of our initial "rights," and our society moves ever nearer to totalitarianism.

So the Church begins by asserting our individual priority (we are baptized and join as "adults") and ends by subordinating our individual visions and energies to the common task of, presumably, producing more individuals. Each congregation has the right to rule itself. Yet all must be disciplined and coordinated for the sake of the larger truth and the institutions we have built to enable us to carry out our churchly task. We begin with the idea of the shared ministry and the priesthood of all believers, but our model leads us to force our leaders into functioning as foremen and as bosses.

4.4. Implicit in the metaphor, and underlying its contradictions, is an ineradicable dualism. The ideal is pure and good. It is true and its truths can be truly known. The thoughts of God have been revealed to us and, as laws, they have become our blueprint. We are the builders who seek to use the matter at our disposal—wood and stone, lives and institutions—and to fashion it according to the blueprint. But the matter resists the plan. It is flawed and weak. The work is no sooner organized, the machines set up, than friction takes its toll. Depreciation immediately begins. Periodically the assembly line must even stop while repairs are made.

And we builders are ourselves the pure ideal and the

flawed matter. "With my mind I serve the law of God." But we are also flesh. Truths have become our laws. And, as Paul well knew, the laws, though good, can never heal the contradictions they produce. "Who shall deliver me from this body of death?" One thing is certain, cure comes neither from old laws nor from old ideas nor from redoubled efforts. Nor from new ones either. We, like the Jews, must be freed of any single world-view, old or new. We must be willing to give up the point of view of man-the-maker before we can discover what is valid in it. Indeed, this angle for our vision makes it impossible to understand Jesus Christ or the Church or the Christian. From this point of view, Incarnation is inconceivable, because matter is only a source of evil. Gnosticism was an early result of a version of man-the-maker. Some variant of that heresy will always be its result.

5. Official Mennonite Brethren historiography, and the lack of it, has been largely governed by the world-view of man-the-maker.

5.1. The "maker" metaphor determines content for the historian who is governed by it. Idealists are not much interested in history. Like scientists, they view the past only as the record of where and by whom truths are discovered. But what is then discovered is timeless, eternal, free from the fate of material and social reality which must always change—or decay and die. Or they look back to some presumed Golden Age when The Truth was discovered and lived out. But Time, that enemy of all Idealisms, allowed attrition and decay. And thieves broke in to steal. Vitalists also are not much interested in history. They look to the past for clues to the future which, perhaps because it has not yet happened, they imagine will unroll with a logical clarity denied to the present. And they then retroject that clarity upon the past, understanding it as no one living then could ever have imagined. Materialists, and institutionalists, are somewhat more con-

cerned to understand the past, for they conceive the present to be merely the result of all the chains of causes that unroll themselves through time.

But what shall our historians see? So far as our official history is concerned, there are three aspects that one can talk about. One can emphasize the ideals that we have claimed. Then our history is the account of the discovery and development in time of a timeless theology. Or one can emphasize the vitality of our mission. I take this to be the emphasis of J.H. Lohrenz, and it is fitting that his hopes for restoration lay in "revival." Or one can stress the official "matter," the institutions we have developed.

I think that J.A. Toews has looked at all three; but after his chapters of beginnings in Russia and in North America, his description is mostly of our institutions. From the point of view of what the Board of Literature intended, his choices, in the main, are justifiable. But these comments do not fully explain the book that is before us. J.A. Toews is critical of some of our official Mennonite Brethren theologizing. And he is much too wise to plead simply-mindedly for revival. Nor can what he says in this book be wholly explained by the "maker" metaphor. But much of the content in it can be.

5.2. The "ineradicable dualism" of man-the-maker determines the interpretations of the historian who is governed by it. While reading the text, I became curious about the key word in the phrase "the providence of God." The use of one favorite phrase does not prove anything in itself, and I am sure that I did not find all uses of it. But a characteristic expression that is almost unconsciously used may illustrate what I think I have accurately seen. On page 25 he writes, "God, in His gracious providence, raised up men and movements to usher in a new day." If he had added "places," this statement would outline every use of the expression save one.

The word is used four times to explain the sudden emergence of leaders. Thus Wuest goes to Russia (p. 30),

Johann Klassen becomes a "trail blazer" (p. 44), several powerful men join the young movement during a crucial period (p. 62), and A.H. Unruh and two fellow teachers move to Canada (p. 114). There are two negative, and doubtful, instances. That Oncken did *not* get to the Molotschna as planned in the fall of 1869 appeared "providential" to "some brethren" (p. 72). It was also "perhaps providential" that none of the original eighteen were ordained (p. 302).

Mass movements of people also require the special consideration symbolized by this phrase. It is used of the emigration to North America in the 1870's (p. 130) and of the emigrants to Brazil because it led to evangelization there (p. 417). So also the VBHH (Verband Buerger Hollaender Herkunft) became the agency for emigration from Russia in the 1920's (p. 119). But this movement raised two problems. If it was God's special will that many should escape Russia, why did most of them not succeed? At any rate, there is the comfort that in God's "inscrutable but gracious providence" a new day was to dawn, even for those who remained (p. 123). And at this remove in time it may appear a bit doubtful that God would move one group of Mennonites out of the promised land of Canada (the Old Colony and Sommerfelder Mennonites to Mexico) just so farms would be available in Manitoba for those who came from Russia. But it is understandable that to the immigrants "it appeared providential" (p. 161).

The word is used three times in reference to a "place." A pioneer missionary to the Russians took five tents to be a "gift of Providence" when he received them from the Russian Red Cross without charge (p. 117). And Kafumba was destined by providence to become the strategic center for the Congo mission (p. 411). But the total destruction of the station there, "the pride and joy of the missionary staff," in the Jeunesse Rebellion of 1964 raises a problem. "Many missionaries, deeply convinced of God's overruling providence, believed that even this tragedy could be a

blessing in disguise," if, that is, a new beginning would "emerge from the ashes of the old" (p. 415).

In every case so far, and a revealing exception is yet to come, the word *providence* has been used in connection with something new and, almost always, something either dramatic or inexplicable. And almost always it involves something "spiritual." No doubt God is at work all the time, but it is new starts that are mysterious and that require providence. The ongoingness of things seems not to do so. I think this correctly reflects our usual thinking. It is most clearly expressed in the first two paragraphs of page three.

"Redemptive and religious history" is the story of "church renewal and new life." Such a story is an account of "the gracious providence of God." "Social, cultural or economic" events are "conditions" that function as "context" for "religious history." And *they*, apparently, are to be understood "simply in terms of an historical framework of cause and effect." And yet these two separate "histories," to which different sorts of explanations apply, constantly intersect. Indeed, almost any given event can be one or the other, depending on the viewpoint from which it is seen.

This sort of historiography "is of no private interpretation." It follows inevitably from our official Mennonite Brethren presuppositions. But the faithful application of our principles (and they are not ours alone) causes them to stand out in bold relief and so reveals their inadequacy. Indeed, the book has helped me to realize that I do not accept them. To assert that "Jesus Christ is the Lord of history" (p. 3) seems to me to deny that there even *is* such a thing as "religious history." And it is a denial also that there is a "secular history." If there is one Lord, then there is, simply,—history.

I think it irrational that "secular history" (the social, cultural, and economic) can only function negatively in relation to "religious history." Throughout this book, these

factors are used to explain decline. They account for the sorry spiritual state of things in Russia. They explain the "cultural change" to which our "unchanging faith" must be related and which now threatens that faith. But they almost never get any credit for helping God in His work among us or for in fact *being* that work among us.

Nor do I understand how the appeal to "God's providence" functions as explanation in either "religious" or "secular" history. We normally bring in that concept when we no longer have any "reasonable" explanation. As historian, it seems to be a pious way of "throwing in the towel."

But as one who has been willingly subjected to "vain philosophies," I must confess the "secular framework of cause and effect" to be at least as mysterious as "providence." The rare event is neither more nor less "natural" than the ordinary one. The only difference, I suspect, is that we do not know enough to expect it. But that says something about our dullness of mind, not about the event. In short, I do not understand "ordinary" events either. But, like most of us, I hide that fact from myself by taking them for granted.

"We believe that we may understand." The Christian thinkers who worked that out knew that it applied equally well to unbeliefs, and it applies to every science—even to physics—as well as to history. It is my belief that it applies as much to sociology and economics as to theology.

It was a bit dishonest to use that loaded phrase "vain philosophies." The biblical reference (Colossians 2:8) is not to what we normally mean by "philosophy." It refers precisely to the kind of thinking that asserted that God was the author only of "new beginnings" in "religious history." The source of the trouble in Colossae was a gnosticizing that was current in that world. They thought that spirits and demons accounted for the ordinary. The great high God could not be bothered with the picayune.

The modern versions of this for man-the-maker types have not changed that much. "Natural Law" now does the work of spirits but is no less mysterious than they. And there is only one really logical place left for God. God is needed, if at all, to get the whole thing (and other new beginnings?) started. Deism is the logical theology for man-the-maker dualisms.

That all this can be said testifies to several things. In the first place, I too have adopted a stance, and it may be that I have misunderstood it. It is certain that I do not fully know the difficulties that may attend it. But, in the second place, I think that "in our heart" most of us do disagree with the man-the-maker world-view which our "head" still takes for granted.

The first two sentences of the Preface tell us that the beginnings of this book, the vision for this sort of history, came from the Board of Reference and Counsel and the Board of Christian Literature. J.A. Toews accepted the assignment from them despite "serious apprehensions." The last sentence of the preface reads, "Above all I am grateful to God who in His gracious providence gave the necessary strength to complete the task." The single exception in his use of *providence* is in its single reference to himself.

The ordinary experience of strength and health to do one's daily task is surely a part of ordinary history. But he knows, and all of us know when we stop to think, that it is every bit as much a special gift of God as was the "sudden" appearance of Wuest in southern Russia. The Creator sustains what He creates and redeems what He sustains. So sure of this were older theologians that some of them could even describe that Sustenance as an every moment re-creation of the whole.

Indeed, I think that it makes as much sense, and as little, to reverse our ordinary judgements. Someone, in the "normal" course of events, got the idea that someone else should write a book. Then God gave continued grace for

its writing. Is this not a parable for other things? In the normal course of events an idea surfaced. And God looked down, noticed it, and said to the Holy Spirit, "Oh! Oh! There are eighteen hot-heads down there going off the deep end. I suppose we better go work together with them to bring some good to pass out of it all."

In any case, the sustaining is no less a miracle than the creating. Many of us have learned that this is so in our own relationships to God. In *practice*, we have ceased to believe and to live out our profoundest and proudest heresies. But we forget this when we put on our "official voice" to speak accredited "public truths." I suspect that many of us do not yet know that we do not *really* believe them.

6. Our official ideal, and the metaphor upon which it is based, do not reflect the whole truth about us. We all know that we have not lived up to the best of the ideals that we profess. What many of us do not yet know is that our stated ideals have neither produced nor accounted for the lives of the best among us. It came as a revelation to me when I finally realized that my father was a far better man than the theology I thought he was preaching. Or, better put, the real theology he lived from and intended was poorly expressed in the rhetoric he had been taught.

6.1. A historian knows that what we have said about ourselves distorts the truth. We all tend to talk about the things that are still questions for us, either the things we are not yet clear about or the things we are clear about but have not yet made our own. For example, future historians sorting out the charred remains of the popular church literature of the twentieth century might well notice that in the 1970's there was much more said about the importance of the family than seemed to be the case in earlier decades. Are they to conclude from this that family life was then becoming better? "Methinks he doth protest too much" is an appropriate scepticism for all those areas in which our records are very insistent and where we con-

tinue to react a bit too quickly and too loudly. Our insistence on conversion, on evangelism, and on biblicism is obviously suspect.

6.2. A historian knows that the records of what we have said about ourselves hide much truth. We do not talk about the things we so assuredly are that we can take them for granted. Indeed, one might argue that we seldom or never bother to think about that which most deeply characterizes us. It may be that the most difficult job of the philosopher, the theologian, and the social scientist is to discover those truths that are so obvious that everyone has forgotten what they are.

J.A. Toews knows the social, ethnic side of us. And I think that many passages show his love and concern for these, our hidden parts. Although this side was not intended to be stressed, he knows that it must at times be discussed in order to explain what happened in our churchly side. But, even so, much that is most deeply true of us has been left unsaid.

Someone who had only this book by which to understand us would almost have to read between the lines to discover that Mennonite Brethren lived in families. According to the index, "family" is first mentioned when the effects of urbanization and television are discussed. There are four very brief mentions after that, only two of which apply to either Russian or North American Mennonites.

For that matter, except for the kissing problem in the early years, and for missionaries, one would scarcely guess that there were sisters among the brothers. The index names ten women: six were missionaries, three wrote something, and one was Katherine II of Russia. Some others were named in the text who were not indexed, especially in the chapter on missions. So far as one could learn from the book, women were rarities in the Mennonite communities, existing only as a Mrs. So-and-So unless she was a missionary or had worked on a book.

Since I believe that the sources have been faithfully re-

flected, I assume that neither the quality of family life nor the status of women was considered by those who left the records to be either a Mennonite Brethren distinctive or a special problem. But surely this does not mean that the quality of our family life and the character of the women are irrelevant to our self-understanding. What I think it means is that these aspects were considered to be either irrelevant or were taken for granted so far as our appearance in the public sphere was concerned. The man spoke when we spoke "officially" in and of the church and to the world, unless the audience consisted of "benighted heathen."

But how could interested non-ethnics know the importance of the extended family and clan among us? How could they guess the myriad ways that these ties gave us psychic strength and influenced our obediences and our ability both to attract others and to repel them? Unless they had studied the patterns of ethnic adjustment to North America among other immigrants, how could they hope to understand our transition from a sense of superiority to self-doubt and, even, from self-hatred to a still tentative but growing feeling of our right to be American? Without a feel for earth being turned by the plow, how can I expect my own city-born children to understand the profound relationship that existed between "*Bibel und Pflug*?" And how can anyone understand anything if there is not at least a passing feel for Low German?

I reject the idea that our "ethnic oddities" are more culture-bound than our theology or that our thinking is more exempt from the effects of sin than is our daily living. Even if God is ever the same, our thinking about Him changes. Our truths may point to the Truth, but all our words are time-bound cultural artifacts. I know of no proposition in theology that inerrantly and unchangeably communicates what it was shaped to signify. God is as truly revealed by our unofficial side as in our preaching.

A year ago I foolishly agreed to teach a course in Men-

nonite Brethren history. Since I knew even less than I do now, I knew better than to set up as an expert. And so I ignored the standard approaches. Moreover, there were a number of young "sceptics" in that class. Instinctively, they, like many of us, are revolting against the heresies of man-the-maker. Our official pieties would only have increased their scepticism. And so I invited a stream of the saints among us to come and talk about themselves. We asked those visitors about the games they played and the way they lived and worked and thought. They described the farm and the shape of their conversions. And we were haunted by the loveliness we saw. We saw a holiness that was more a result of family and clan, and of land and work, than it was of our official pieties and theologies. We found incarnations, not empty ideals or bloodless concepts. We sensed that reality is more profound than all the ways we find to talk about it. We found that we have limitations, but we discovered that even our most unlikely curiosities can be vehicles of grace. Any attempt to teach our own youth that does not begin with living people has forfeited the game before it starts. Any Christian who does not understand that the Christ had to come as flesh, as the living, culture-bounded Jesus, is a heretic. Whoever does not understand that the Gospel is more a story than a set of propositions has sold out to the spirit of an already passing age.

We have often been less than the things we have said about ourselves. But we have always been much more. And we have been healthiest when we have lived out of more metaphors than one. Our elders spoke about their new ideals. They were right in doing so. But they did not forsake the older structures by which they had lived. The new had not done away with the old, and so the strengths of the old could nourish the new and keep it from becoming everything. But more and more we have tended to become the things we talked about. And so we lost the old that we either took for granted or were ashamed of. When we shall

have succeeded in fully remaking ourselves in the image of our public pieties and our official truths, we shall have turned them into an empty husk, a shrill ideology, and an idolatry that damns us.

7. But what shall we do now? One thing that we can do is to set our hearts to tell the story again. Now we must shape a drama that sings the truth which cannot literally be said. So far, the only serious historian among us of this sort is the novelist Rudy Wiebe. But there are other ways than his to tell it.

We cannot expect much from our official leaders. They have become who they are because we have rewarded those who most completely embodied the official wisdom. We have elevated those who have despised or never understood the private parts, the quiet incarnations, the beautiful old songs.

That is not completely true. Many of the older ones, and some of the younger too, have not been wholly shaped by the way we talked. They too are horrified to discover that our concentration on our official truths and acts has helped to undermine the wholeness that we were. And so I appeal to those who remember that wholeness to meditate upon it and to tell us how it came to be. If you do not, then we, or our children, will have to discover the meaning of wholeness somewhere else.

But I fear it is too late. The new community cannot be based upon our "official" truths and the metaphor from which they flow. Nor can it be based upon Low German and centennial celebrations. And so I will celebrate with those who begin again. Somewhere, hidden by the confusions of this time-between-the-times, a new pattern with a promise will be born. I pray that my children will find it. And if I do not join them, I hope that they will recognize in me one who could not celebrate new incarnations if I did not celebrate the old.

II

1860: ORIGINS OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN

1525 REVISITED?

A COMPARISON OF ANABAPTIST AND MENNONITE BRETHREN ORIGINS

Cornelius J. Dyck

According to the self-understanding of its founding fathers the Mennonite Brethren movement of 1860 must clearly be identified as a restitutionist effort paralleling that of sixteenth century Anabaptists, particularly the work of Menno Simons. Four references are made to Menno in the January 6, 1860 *Document of Secession*, followed by the statement: "In all other articles of our confession we are also in accord with Menno Simons."¹ Later in the same year, in a letter of December 27 to the Supervisory Commission, they wrote:

We are not a newly-established sect, as the worthy Supervisory Commission likes to call us. On the contrary, we are the seed of the imperishable Word of God, which was preached to us by the Apostles, explained through the Holy Spirit, and have become a fruit of the living faith of our beloved founder (*Stammvater*) Menno Simons, who in all his church regulations and confessions of faith practiced and established them even as we; hence we can rightly call ourselves the genuine descendents of true Mennonitism.²

The documents compiled by Jacob P. Bekker confirm this self-understanding, including his own struggle over baptism, about which he wrote: "Not until I discovered that Menno Simons confessed to baptism in water did I have the liberty and joy to initiate this practice."³

This restitutionist understanding is also a basic presupposition of later historiography. In his massive work *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Brüderschaft in Russland (1789-1910)* P. M. Friesen reiterates this theme in many ways. "Therefore we as Mennonites," he writes, "are heirs in spirit and blood . . . overwhelmingly of the Dutch Ana-

baptists, for the latter were first named 'Mennonites.' ”⁴ He is convinced that “Menno built the house in which we live . . .”⁵ and after examining the evidence he concludes with the statement: “That the Brethren remained ‘Mennonite’ has now presumably been sufficiently documented.”⁶ More recently F. C. Peters concluded: “It seems rather clear that the Mennonite Brethren revival was meant to be a return to the Anabaptist vision, rather than a deviation from it.”⁷ This is also the conviction of J. A. Toews in *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*. While it becomes most central in his discussion of Brethren theology in Chapter 21, it is explicit in many places, and implicit throughout the volume. The first chapter is entitled “Spiritual Heirs of the Early Anabaptists.” In it this premise is explicitly stated:

The name, ‘Mennonite Brethren,’ which the founding fathers gave to the new church, was not the result of practical expediency, nor a matter of ecclesiastical diplomacy. It was a conscious and deliberate identification of the early Brethren with the historic theological position of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement.⁸

These statements by the Brethren of 1860 and later writers, and particularly the identification of author J. A. Toews with them, have implications for methodology. The norm is not to be Pietism, nor the Baptists, nor contemporary Evangelicalism or other movements, but specifically sixteenth century Anabaptism and Menno in particular. This could have led to an essay in apologetics or hagiography instead of history, but it did not. On the other hand it could have led to a revisionist attempt in behalf of either Anabaptist or Brethren historiography, or both, but I do not think that it did. What we have before us is a faithful, well-documented account of what Leopold von Ranke called *so wie es gewesen ist*, a factual and carefully interpreted history. Since the Brethren declared their intention to be a return to sixteenth century Anabaptist norms it is methodologically necessary to understand their

actions in that context. This essay explores the validity of this claim and comments on the extent to which they succeeded in achieving their intention.

Brethren Knowledge of Anabaptism

Before proceeding to an analysis of 1525 *viz.* 1536 and 1860, a prior question should be raised: how much did the eighteen signers of the *Document of Secession*, and those who joined the cause, actually know about Anabaptism? Were they consciously drawing on written sixteenth century documents or was their understanding of the heritage shaped by oral tradition and practice? Did they know Menno's life and thought or genuflect before him for the invoking of authority? Since the special provisions of the *Privilegium* applied only to Mennonites, and since the colony administration and church elders had informed the Russian authorities that those joining the new movement had left the Mennonite Church, it became a matter of political and economic survival for the Brethren to prove that they were, in fact, Mennonites. Granted that human motives are always difficult to identify and isolate, what knowledge beyond this existential imperative, was there to support the claim and the vision?

According to P. M. Friesen only three items had been published by the Mennonites in Russia before the schism — a reprint of the hymnal brought from Prussia, published in 1844, a polemical tract of 1845 against the *Kleine Gemeinde*, and an 1853 reprint of the old Flemish-Frisian and High German Confession of Faith.⁹ We note from their references, particularly in the *Document* and in the memoirs of Jacob P. Bekker, that they had the three-volume *Foundation of Christian Doctrine* of Menno, published by Peter van Riesen in Danzig in 1834. There are no other explicit references to Menno's writings. We assume Bekker would have found the latter's *Christian Baptism* helpful, had he known about it.¹⁰ His three page biography of Menno is based on a 23 page pamphlet published anonymously in

1852 under the title *Kurze älteste Geschichte der Taufgesinnten (Mennoniten genannt)*.¹¹ It appears not to have been written by a Mennonite, which may account for P. M. Friesen's omission of it in his references. It is a meager source. Martin Klaassen's substantial history was not available until 1873.¹²

We need to remember, however, that Mennonite migration from Prussia to Russia continued during this entire period and into the 1860s, and with it increasingly sophisticated cultural influences. The immigrants to the *Trakt* settlement, for example, no longer used the Low German language. The coming of the Gnadenfeld settlers in 1835, brought the deep spiritual concerns rooted in Herrnhuter-Pietism, but also Mennonite traditions. Mennonites also returned to Prussia to visit relatives and may have brought along Anabaptist-Mennonite materials or insights. On the other hand, we do not know of Anabaptist inspired renewal movements among the Mennonites in Prussia at this time either. The renewal begun by Claas Reimer in 1812, which led to the founding of the *Kleine Gemeinde*, was fed initially by the impact of the *Martyrs' Mirror* as well as the writings of Menno and Dirk Philips. Some of these works must have been in circulation in the colonies. The educational efforts of Tobias Voth, Heinrich Heese, and Heinrich Franz undoubtedly facilitated knowledge of Mennonite heritage, as did the subsequent work of Johann Cornies, 1843 to his death in 1848.¹³

The extent of Anabaptist literature available to the Mennonites in Russia in mid-nineteenth century needs further study, including the sermons, devotional materials, hymnals and fiction brought from Germany. This study should include the literature brought to Russia by the Hutterites in 1770 and their contacts with the Mennonites. This would have been a direct contact with the heritage of the Swiss Brethren. We are led to conclude, however, that the Russian Mennonites knew nothing about Swiss Anabaptism and that "the Fathers" for them meant the Dutch

wing of Anabaptism, primarily Menno. A residual, tradition-oriented knowledge of the heritage did exist via that channel, but there was little fresh and concrete awareness of it. The socio-cultural ethnic identity provided the actual frame of reference for life and thought. It may be that the ten articles of the *Privilegium* served as a kind of surrogate confession of faith, giving identity and a *raison d'être* to them as a people.¹⁴ In any case, traditional ethnic Menno-nitism provided the *form* for the renewal efforts of the Brethren, but the *essence* included social and economic factors as well as Baptist and Pietist elements, including an impetus from the latter to a new study of the Bible.

1525, 1536 and 1860 Compared

In considering the issues surrounding the events of 1860 we are led to inquire quickly about the root causes of the schism. Most reformatory movements in the history of the church stress the primacy of spiritual motives. The Brethren movement of 1860 is no exception. Strong spiritual concerns were indeed present as they were in the reformation movements of the sixteenth century. These concerns, however, do not dilute the significance of economic, social, and political causes, nor the role of the *dramatis personae* involved.

The issue of morality: An immediate parallel exists between Menno in 1536 and the Brethren in 1860 in their concern over the immorality of members in good standing in the church. In both instances the central concern was the nature of the church. It was no longer the Body of Christ. There was no discipline either among laity or clergy.

The moral indictments of Menno were directed against both private and public issues. The people were profligate and dissolute. Thus he writes: "Turning to the common people we find such an impossible, carnal, blind, uncircumcised horde, that we are astonished."¹⁵ "You eat, drink, dress up, grab, hoard, and scrape, whether legally or

illegally . . . It is the rashest blindness to think that we could be saved and at the same time be avaricious, spiteful, envious, proud, adulterous and idolatrous."¹⁶ The princes too are immoral. "Seeing then that you carry on unjustly and tyrannically," Menno writes, "according to the evil purpose of your heart, without Scripture and without mercy against the helpless and God-fearing, how can you look for any grace and mercy in the day of the Lord . . ."¹⁷ But his sharpest invective is reserved for the clergy: "They who pastor us deceive us. And those who pose as pastors are thieves and murderers of our souls."¹⁸ He goes on to describe priests who chant psalms "while beer and wine run from their drunken mouths and noses."¹⁹ And again:

For it is manifest that a portion of them are useless, haughty, immoral men; some are avaricious, userers, liars, deceivers; some are drunkards, gamblers, licentious, open seducers, idolaters, etc. concerning whom it is written that they shall not inherit the kingdom of God if they do not repent.²⁰

These indictments find their parallels among the Mennonites of Russia in 1860. The root cause of this moral decay was blind traditionalism. The lower cultural milieu of the Russian environment fostered ethnic pride and spiritual indifference among many. Though Bekker's memoirs were written much later and in a different cultural context they provide valuable insight into the pre-1860 situation. From his perspective the liquor which was provided for in article four of the *Privilegium* was the primary villain. Like Menno, Bekker places the burden of responsibility upon the ministers. "They were aware of these drunkards, yet the offenders were allowed to remain members of the church and were admitted to partake of the Lord's Supper."²¹ It was his conclusion that "the clergy had become unfit to promote the spiritual life of the Mennonite community as a whole."²² The *Document* states: "The teachers do not stand in the gap as of old." (Ezekiel 22:30).

This spiritual decline has been documented briefly in Toews' *History* and rightly associated with the loss of the

New Testament concept of the church.²³ In relation to personal morality any differences between 1536 and 1860 are relative only. The origin of the concern, however, varied. Though Menno had been exposed to Luther's writings and knew the Brethren of the Common Life, the immediate impetus came to him from a study of the Scriptures on the specific issues of the eucharist and baptism. The impetus in 1860 did not come unannounced suddenly with Eduard Wuest, but it did come from his ministry and tended to be more narrowly personal, as was the piety of Gnadenfeld. There seemed to be little awareness that the *Privilegium* itself had set the parameters for Mennonite peoplehood. Yet the nature of the church, the lack of discipline, the failure of the clergy were the primary concerns both in 1536 and in 1860.

Church and state relationships: While the central concern of the Swiss Brethren was over the nature of the church, the debate with Zwingli and the Zurich city council was over the authority of the council in church affairs. The separation of 1860 was a revisitation of 1525 in the rejection of secular authority, albeit Mennonite, over things spiritual even though the Brethren knew nothing of the events which led to the first Anabaptist baptism on January 21, 1525.

In the October, 1523 debate of the Swiss Brethren with the Zurich authorities Simon Stumpf said to Zwingli: "Master Ulrich: You have no authority to place the decision in the hands of My Lords, for the decision [about the Mass] is already made; the Spirit of God decides."²⁴ The protest of 1860 was more radical. It was a revolt against the Mennonite state and imposed ethnicity. Not only did the secular power have no rights in spiritual affairs, but Mennonites had no right wielding secular power. In a remarkable document entitled *Faith and Reason* written in 1833 by Heinrich Balzer, a Mennonite minister in the Molotschna colony, who later joined the *Kleine Gemeinde*, the suggestion is made that Mennonite secular authority

should play only a mediating role between church and state:

Members who serve the worldly affairs of the church should consider themselves only as liaison officers between the authorities and the elders who direct the ministry of the Word. They must never think of themselves as separate, so to speak secular functionaries with any kind of authority to arbitrarily direct the church according to the laws and powers of the state. Inasmuch as they are brethren in the church, such an assumption would mean an act directly against our tenets and would involve the destruction of our spiritual fellowship.²⁵

This concern was thus not unique in 1860. Balzer obviously reflected and elaborated the concerns of Claas Reimer who had protested the use of coercion within the spiritual brotherhood and moved to form the *Kleine Gemeinde* as alternate.

P. M. Friesen refers to the *Oberschulz* of the Molotschna colony as the "nearly omnipotent David Friesen of Halbstadt."²⁶ In words reminiscent of 1525 Friesen wrote to the Brethren:

We give you one month to think it over. If within that time you do not return to the church, measures will be taken in earnest to execute church verdicts against you, to disenfranchise you as colonists, and to banish you from our midst.²⁷

The schism might never have happened had a more irenic man occupied Friesen's chair. Nevertheless, the edicts and correspondence directed by Friesen's office against the Brethren are a sad commentary on the bankruptcy of the Russian Mennonite experiment in colonial self-administration.²⁸ They were certainly, in the words of Article VI of Schleithem, 1527 "outside of the perfection of Christ."²⁹

Coupled with these developments was the growing hierarchical power of the elders and their alliance with the secular office of colony administration. Since ministers were normally chosen from among the well-to-do landowners, they tended to be less sympathetic to the needs of the

landless poor. The first step in securing a passport, for example, which was necessary for any travel outside of the colonies, required the authorization of an elder.³⁰ The power of the elders suffered loss in 1841, and again in 1847, when recalcitrant elders refused to cooperate with Johann Cornies' educational and agricultural reforms. They were deposed by Mennonite secular authority and had their church districts divided into smaller units with the support of the Odessa Supervisory Commission.³¹ The forming of the *Kirchenconvent* (Council of Elders) by 1850 restored some of this authority. Nevertheless the colonies became, in fact, a *corpus christianum* in which membership was acquired by birth and all social, economic or religious privileges were enjoyed by virtue of membership in the group, not by individual right. The anomaly of this situation became clear as it had in Zurich in 1525, but increasingly so since both sides of the issue were Mennonites. This does not mean that a "brotherhood type of church" could not have survived in the Russian context, but only that it did not.³² Later experiences in Russia and in Paraguay were to prove more successful.

Persecution: Parallels between the movements of 1525, 1536, and 1860 are clear in relation to persecution experienced. No lives were lost in 1860, but the fact that the suffering endured was brought about by so-called brothers of the faith, and with the full knowledge and even initiative of the elders, adds particular pathos to the situation.

The migration to the Kuban was tantamount to exile or, in any case, in the noble tradition of Abraham's amicable response to Lot (Genesis 13). Before this could happen, however, the Brethren suffered intense opposition and ridicule. Some suffered physical hardship. Ironically, it was the elders who turned the seceding members over to the District Court for prosecution claiming to have exhausted all means to win them back.³³ They did ask that "in so far as is legally permissible, more lenient measures be applied first."³⁴

The suffering of sixteenth century Anabaptists is amply

recorded in the *Martyrs' Mirror*, the *Tauferakten*, and other sources including the writings of Menno. The suffering of the Brethren of 1860 is less amply documented but nevertheless adequate for a comprehensive picture, particularly in the writings of Bekker, Franz Isaac,³⁵ and above all P. M. Friesen. There were repeated threats of deportation to Siberia. Civil and economic liberties were withdrawn. Observation teams were sent to visit Brethren services. Some were banned, which led to economic ruin. The derogatory reports to Russian officials were especially harmful. Many were imprisoned.³⁶ Arrests for interrogation were common. Some endured corporal punishment as illustrated in the following extract from a lengthy description of Jacob Janzen about the experience of his father:

One day in February, 1862 the mayor of the village convened the villagers to reach a council decision. There my father was told that the meetings must cease and he must stay at home. My father said: We must obey God rather than man . . . Because my father did not promise to stay at home the mayor N. N. became very angry and ran outside to fetch whipping rods. When the assembly saw this they all ran away and nothing happened. My father was jailed immediately. Next day he was again brought before the mayor. He was questioned again but remained steadfast. Thereupon a bale of straw was thrown on the ground and mayor N, who was a strong man, tore my fathers clothes from his body . . . and began beating him with six rods, ten times, as hard as he was able in his rage. . . Then he was returned to prison. There was no heat. We were poor. His clothes were thin. N. rolled a block of wood into the prison and shouted: Now you can sit down. But my father could not sit because of the beating he had received. He managed somehow to sit a bit and pull himself together to keep his teeth from chattering so, but he could not sit long and soon had to walk again. But the Lord helped throughout. It was bright in that room though there was no light, and he experienced indescribable blessings. Thus he spent two days and two nights . . .³⁷

Some spent weeks in prison. The mail of the Brethren was censored or confiscated.³⁸ The official recognition of the Brethren by the Ohrloff congregation and eventually by the Russian authorities ended the persecution. In St. Petersburg Senator Hahn said to Brethren representative Johann Klassen, "You owe your deliverance to Elder Harder."³⁹ The silence of the "good" majority is puzzling and appalling.

The suffering endured by the Brethren was neither as intense nor as prolonged as was Anabaptist suffering in the sixteenth century. No one was burned at the stake. Though the suffering of 1860 was intense it does not, in itself, identify the Brethren with the sixteenth century movement, but their patience in it and the reasons for the suffering do. They suffered for the renewal of the church, for the vision of a Believers' Church "without spot or wrinkle" (Menno). When their time had come they stood firm against the opposition from within their own brotherhood, perhaps paralleling some earlier experiences in Dutch Anabaptism, or the tension between Hut and Hubmaier in 1526.

The roots of this hostility against the Brethren were many. The schism destroyed the monolithic structure of Mennonite society, with attendant economic, cultural, and political implications. It revealed the spiritual decay being indicted by the Brethren, a decay which allowed ruthless men to be in administrative offices in a brotherhood while remaining members in good standing in the church. The schism revealed the close alliance of the spiritual leaders with the economically privileged ruling class and the fear by the majority of this oligarchy. The revolt was a threat to the long standing structure of authority, the beginning of the end of an era, which the administrators and elders sensed. The excesses of the Brethren movement in its early stages were a factor in their initial rejection by many, but they also provided a ready excuse for rejection on personal and other grounds. The persecution remains a tragic chap-

ter in Mennonite history, mitigated only slightly by the courageous defense of Johann Harder and others.

Aberrations: A fourth parallel between 1525 *viz.* 1536 and 1860 lies in the emotional excesses which accompanied the initial stages of the movements. While the contexts and manifestations varied, the enthusiasm of the *Frohliche Richtung* finds its parallels in early Anabaptism. Excesses appeared in St. Gall in 1526 after the movement encountered persecution, including infantile expressions demonstrating "becoming as little children" in an extreme Biblical literalism. Thomas Schugger, who reportedly killed his brother at the command of the Spirit, may have been a marginal Anabaptist. The *Naaktlopers* who ran naked through the streets of Amsterdam in 1535 to declare the naked truth to all mankind were similarly over-enthusiastic as were the eschatological visions of Melchior Hoffman. The debacle of Munster reached its violent climax in 1535. Nevertheless, the "false freedom" movement among the Brethren⁴⁰ finds a closer parallel in the antinomianism attending Luther's reformation than in Anabaptism. On the other hand, the "spiritual despotism" of which Toews writes,⁴¹ finds parallels in the harsh banning practices of the Dutch elders. The "June Reform",⁴² in turn, might be compared to the 1527 meeting at Schleithem in terms of its concern for order and unity.⁴³

In each case the psychological stress attending renewal and persecution led to aberrations which were eventually brought under control, but which left their negative impact on the public image of the movements. The relief of the majority of Mennonites in the colony when the "mad year (Fall 1864 to Spring 1865)", as P. M. Friesen called it, came to an end is described vividly by him. A "broad stream of good will" was extended to the Brethren by all but the "fanatically hostile" among the "church" Mennonites, including particularly many former brothers of the faith, friends and relatives.⁴⁴ In the sixteenth century Anabaptists did not experience this kind of rapprochement

within five years of their origin. Aberrations have been a part of most renewal movements in church and society. They tend to be defined as such by moderates or opponents impatient with evolving leadership patterns and changing objectives. It was easier to start the French Revolution than to stop it.

Sense of mission: A fifth parallel to the sixteenth century lies in the strong missionary consciousness of the Brethren of 1860. Witnessing to the spiritually lost or impoverished, both within the Mennonite brotherhood and beyond, became for them an inseparable part of the nature of the church of Christ. The primary agenda item of the first Mennonite Brethren Conference, held in 1872, was evangelism.⁴⁵ The statistics given in Chapter 23 of the new *History* confirm the effectiveness of this vision. The sense of mission in early Anabaptism has been amply documented by Franklin H. Littell, Wolfgang Schaufele, and others.⁴⁶ If the nature of the church was at the heart of Anabaptist concern the missionary vision of the Brethren of 1860 represents the first vital recovery of that heritage, though we should not overlook the earlier influence and activities of Tobias Voth, Bernhard Fast, the Ohrloff and Gnadenfeld churches and others, as Gerhard Lohrenz has reminded us.⁴⁷ Here they indeed shared the spirit of Menno when he wrote:

We could wish that we might save all mankind from the jaws of hell, free them from the chains of their sins, and by the gracious help of God add them to Christ by the Gospel of His peace. For this is the true nature of the love which is of God.⁴⁸

It has sometimes been held that the Mennonites forfeited their birthright by promising not to engage in missionary activity in Russia. There is no evidence of such a promise. It is true, however, that on July 22, 1763, long before their coming, a law was passed in Russia which forbade all proselyting by anyone on pain of severe punishment. The Mennonites were probably apprised of this law.

The presence of this prohibition makes the "civil disobedience" of the early Brethren even more significant. The present volume is unduly modest in this regard. The Brethren took grave risks to life and property in carrying their witness beyond the Mennonites, and some suffered for it.⁴⁹ Gerhard Lohrenz reports:

Thus Ehrt concludes that 'the Mennonites were important carriers and leaders of the evangelical movement. Mennonitism was the midwife and tutor of Russian evangelicalism . . . In the historical-spiritual field this is the most significant contribution of the Mennonites in Russia.' . . . Saloff-Astakhoff wrote: 'Yet though they [the Mennonites] could not evangelize openly they had a strong influence upon the surrounding Russian population, helping to spread the evangelical Protestant movement in this country.'⁵⁰

The Theological Identity of the Brethren

The historical origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church have been amply documented in the present *History*. There was clearly a convergence of Anabaptist-Mennonite, Pietist, and Baptist influences in its birth. Economic factors were present but to see these as primary is to commit the same error present in contemporary Marxist historiography about Anabaptism. The evidence does not support the thesis. Author Toews correctly stresses the importance of Ohrloff and Gnadenfeld,⁵¹ and might well have included them under his subtitle "The Influence of Pietism", together with Eduard Wuest. In view of the growing influence these two centers were developing it may be that the primary significance of Wuest was to precipitate the schism by introducing alien agenda from without. We will never know the extent of the renewal that would have come without him. Some of the most positive and negative influences upon Mennonites throughout their history have come from outside of the group.

In assessing Anabaptist, Pietist, and Baptist influences

upon the early life of the Brethren it should be remembered that they knew little of Swiss Anabaptist history with its roots in Humanism and the Zwinglian magisterial reformation. What they did know was Menno's *Foundation of Christian Doctrine* and felt an ethnic as well as Spiritual kinship with him. Menno's roots were not in Humanism but in the Brethren of the Common Life and Catholic piety. In his self-depreciation, his stress upon repentance and confession (*Busskampf*), and especially in making a personal conversion experience rather than the nature of the church central to his theology Menno came within a hairsbreadth of classical Halle Pietism. Consequently the recovery of this emphasis by the Brethren through the influence of Herrnhut-Gnadenfeld and Wuest was not so much a detour as a return home, though the latter's antinomianism was a new and probably unwholesome influence. Twentieth century Mennonite historiography has made Dutch Anabaptism and Pietism too antithetical and under-stated the differences between the Dutch and Swiss movements. That the practice of baptism by immersion came about through Baptist influence, and possibly the tract from the Free Evangelical Church of St. Gall to which P. M. Friesen refers, seems clear.⁵²

The identity of the Believers' Church, however, is often determined more by historical discontinuity than by continuity. The appeals of the Brethren to Menno do not in themselves guarantee authentic Anabaptism, *viz.* Menno-ritism. Since the references to Menno seem to be entirely to his 1539 *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, something of the shape of the Brethren theological emphasis may be assessed in how they used that document, particularly in the January 6, 1860 *Document of Secession*. In doing this we need to remember that the *Document* was drafted quickly and without any intention of making it a confession of faith. It is interesting to note how much more irenic it is in tone than Menno's polemic. Also, though Menno does not tire of identifying himself as a miserable

sinner, the *Document* is by far the more modest of the two.

We are led to ask immediately why the *Document* chooses to discuss only the ordinances and the ministry, in addition to the preamble, and contents itself with stating twice that in all other articles "we are in full agreement with Menno Simons." Was Menno's statement on the ordinances and ministry inadequate, or did the Brethren consider these issues at the heart of their concern? The latter was most likely the case since they do not add new interpretation to what Menno wrote, except for the addition of article (g) on footwashing. But the issue probably lay deeper in the concern of the Brethren for the organizing of a new spiritual community. Ministry and ordinances are the structure around which a fellowship was to be gathered and where the frustration with the established church was greatest. The *Document* is, therefore, more organizationally than theologically oriented and stands in considerable parallel to the Schleithem articles of 1527.

Beyond this, the *Document* seems intended to stress a major point of disagreement with the old church—the absence of a personal conversion experience as a prerequisite for baptism. This lacuna carried with it implicit consequences for the Lord's Supper by defiling the Body of Christ every time believers observed it together with unbelievers. And basic to these concerns was the spiritual inadequacy of the ministers, including the manner of their calling to office. Because of these factors the *Document* stresses the necessity of separation from "these decadent churches" but commits the signers to prayers for them. It is finally also significant that the Brethren explicitly place the Scriptures before Menno in the wording of article (d). Their convictions are based on Scripture "in agreement with our dear Menno."

There are many issues discussed by Menno which are not mentioned in the *Document* except with the blanket statement of agreement with him. This is a strong theolo-

gical affirmation of Menno's views on Christology and pneumatology, eschatological urgency, stress upon repentance and regeneration, discipleship, reliance on spiritual weapons only, the danger of false learning ("the Word is plain and needs no interpretation"), the place of magistracy, and encouragement to the Bride of Christ to be faithful until he comes.

Footwashing is not mentioned by Menno in this treatise. He refers to it in other places, but without special emphasis, as a "custom of the saints", but does not make it a sign of the true church.⁵³ The renewed emphasis of the Brethren on this Dominical practice is undoubtedly based on Article IX of the *Confession* of the Flemish, Frisian, and High German Mennonites, printed in Odessa in 1853, which they had available.⁵⁴ Among the Dutch Anabaptists it was Dirk Philips rather than Menno who stressed footwashing in his writings.

In all of these emphases of the Brethren, with the exception of baptism by immersion, the evidence of their congruity with the teaching of Menno is strong and clear. Aside from all historical lineage the theological identity in itself thus confirms, though only briefly tested here, that 1860 was indeed 1525 *viz.* 1536 revisited, both in essence and in form. If this is true it actually becomes unnecessary to speak of practical Biblicism, experiential faith, witnessing, discipleship, and brotherhood as Brethren "distinctives,"⁵⁵ but rather to see them as an integral part of the historic Anabaptist-Mennonite definition of what it means to be a Believers' Church.

In Retrospect

It may be that theologically the term *schism* belongs more to the vocabulary of Cyprian's third century *extra ecclesia nulla salus est* era, or to a monolithic *corpus christianum* and the age of the Inquisition, or even to the sociology of a parish church pattern than to Believers' Church congregationalism, but it has been a part of Anabaptist-

Mennonite experience from the beginning. Given the ideals of freedom, brotherhood, consensus, and the commitment to love, the term *swarming* might be more appropriate for separations within the Believers' Church.

From our twentieth century perspective we are tempted to ask whether the tension and suffering, and ultimately the schism, was really necessary either in the sixteenth century or in 1860. Would moderation have achieved the same results in the end without the agony experienced? Zwingli was deeply concerned for reform in 1525. In 1856 the Agricultural Society of the Molotschna colony issued a query to all teachers in the colony asking for their evaluation of the moral situation. A majority of them (37) reported that moral reforms were very urgently needed.⁵⁶ References have already been made to the deep concern of Elder Johann Harder and his congregation at Ohrloff, as well as the Gnadenfeld settlement and many others who were in real sympathy with the Brethren concern for renewal. Would it have come anyway had they been more patient?

We will never know, of course. Yet neither sixteenth century Anabaptists nor the Brethren of 1860 were "set" on schism; all wanted renewal of the church, not division. The well-known description of the events of January 21, 1525, which closes with the words, "Thereby began separation from the world and from its evil works," was not written by the Swiss Brethren but by the Hutterian chronicler.⁵⁷ The discussions were terminated by the authorities, not by the Grebel circle. By 1527, however, the actual situation led to a clearly developed rationale for separation, spelled out in Article IV of Schleitheim: "... He orders us to be and to become separated from the evil one . . . therefore to go out from Babylon and from the earthly Egypt."⁵⁸

Menno struggled for eleven years before he broke with Roman Catholicism in 1536. It represented a sharp rejection of historic Christianity in both doctrine and practice and a redefinition of the meaning of Christian identity.⁵⁹

Menno wanted nothing less than the restitution of Biblical Christianity, not reformation, but it seemed to him that Rome wanted neither. The break was less radical for Grebel and his circle because Zwingli also had a vision of restitution. The difference between them and him lay initially in how and when it should be achieved.

The 1860 *Document* of the Brethren includes elements of both of these procedures. Like the Grebel circle they too pleaded repeatedly for renewal. The request that Elder Lenzmann celebrate communion with them shows their initial non-separatist intentions. But their prognosis gave them little ground for hope. They longed for a true Believers' Church where new life in Christ, admonition, and discipleship would be taken seriously. The line of demarcation between church and world had become blurred and needed to be redrawn in the power of the Spirit.

Few schismatics have set out deliberately to destroy the unity of the church. Their descendents see them not as schismatics but as pioneers of the faith. Those who defended the *status quo* are seen as the real schismatics. An assorted combination of social, economic, political, personal and, above all, spiritual motives have always been involved. Paradoxical as it may seem, the Holy Spirit appears to bring disunity as well as unity to the church, though his primary gift is love. This is the tragedy and, perhaps the necessity of the endless chain of schisms in the church. Undue concern over schisms may reflect an over-institutional view of the church as well. In the inscrutable wisdom of God it appears that he is able to add glory to his name not only *in spite* of these schisms, but often *because* of them. 1860 would be a case in point.

NOTES

1. John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 363-364.
3. Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Ks.: The Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1973), p. 180.
4. Quoted in Toews, *History*, p. 362.
5. P. M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Brüderschaft in Russland, 1789-1910* (Halbstadt: Verlagsgesellschaft Raduga, 1911), p. 174.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
7. Quoted in Toews, *History*, p. 367.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
9. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, pp. 669f.
10. Bekker, *Origin*, p. 72.
11. (Odessa: Franzow and Witsche, 1852).
12. Martin Klaassen, *Geschichte der wehrlosen taufgesinnten Gemeinden von den Zeiten der Apostel bis auf die Gegenwart* (Danzig: Edwin Groening, 1873). See also Walter Klaassen, "A Belated Review . . ." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XLIX (January 1975): 43-52.
13. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, pp. 596f. See also Leonhard Froese, "Das Pädagogische Kultursystem der mennonitischen Siedlungsgruppe in Russland," (Ph.D. dissertation Gottingen University, 1949). For a discussion of non-Mennonite literature in the colonies see Jacob John Toews, "Cultural Background of Mennonite Brethren Church," (MA thesis, University of Toronto, 1951), pp. 169-174.

14. Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 10-13 for text of the *Privilegium* in translation.
15. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), p. 402.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
21. Bekker, *Origin*, p. 19.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
23. Toews, *History*, pp. 19-25.
24. Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1967), p. 29.
25. Robert Friedmann, "Faith and Reason: The Principles of Mennonitism Reconsidered, in a Treatise of 1833," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XXII (April 1948): 91.
26. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, p. 166.
27. Toews, *History*, p. 45.
28. Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 79f. See also Franz Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt: Druck von H. J. Braun, 1908). Note also the evaluation of Isaac's volume by Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, p. 164, n. 1 as "einseitiges Buch . . . mit seiner heroischen Offenherzigkeit."
29. John H. Yoder, *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973), p. 39.
30. Bekker, *Origin*, p. 33.
31. Toews, *History*, p. 23.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 20. Quoted from Robert Kreider, "The Ana-

baptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XXV (January 1951): 22.

33. Toews, *History*, p. 39.
34. Bekker, *Origin*, p. 57.
35. Isaac, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten*.
36. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, pp. 276-278.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.
40. Toews, *History*, p. 60; Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, pp. 347-353.
41. Toews, *History*, p. 61.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
43. Yoder, *The Legacy*, pp. 27f.
44. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, p. 375.
45. Toews, *History*, p. 76.
46. Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), Ch. IV; Wolfgang Schaufele, *Dass missionarische Bewusstsein der Täufer* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966).
47. Gerhard Lohrenz, "The Mennonites of Russia and the Great Commission," in Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *A Legacy of Faith* (Newton, Ks.: Faith and Life Press, 1962), pp. 175f.
48. *Complete Writings*, p. 633.
49. Lohrenz, "The Mennonites of Russia," pp. 179f.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.
51. Toews, *History*, pp. 27-29.
52. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, p. 243.

53. *Complete Writings*, pp. 417, 1063. See also William E. Keeney, *Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice, 1539-1564* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1968), pp. 154f., and Cornelius Krahn, *Menno Simons* (Karlsruhe: H. Schneider Verlag, 1936), pp. 142f.
54. *Confession oder kurzes und einfältiges Glaubensbekenntniss derer so man nennt die vereinigte Flämische, Friesische, und Hochdeutsche Taufgesinnte Mennonitengemeinde*. Ausgegeben durch die Gemeinde zu Rudnerweide in Sudrussland (Odessa: Franzow and Nitzsche, 1853).
55. Toews, *History*, pp. 367f.
56. Toews, "Cultural Background," pp. 154-160.
57. Dyck, ed., *An Introduction*, p. 34.
58. Yoder, *The Legacy*, p. 38.
59. see Cornelius J. Dyck, "The Place of Tradition in Dutch Anabaptism," *Church History* 43 (March 1974): 34-49.

THE RUSSIAN ORIGINS OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN SOME OBSERVATIONS

John B. Toews

Historically speaking, the problem of origins is never simple and always complex. Trying to explain the emergence of a small group of dissenters amidst another group of historic dissenters in mid-nineteenth century Russia raises certain fundamental questions. What was the setting of the event? What ideas were involved? How long were they in circulation? What kind of personalities participated in the dispute? Did socio-economic factors play a role? Was the event an isolated episode or part of a widespread upheaval? Answers to these problems involve two further questions. What kind of sources are available and how can they be interpreted?

Inherent in a long-standing ethno-religious group like the Mennonites or a new life movement within it such as the Mennonite Brethren are several difficulties which complicate an examination of the origins question. The first involves the group's awareness of its past. This consciousness need not include a knowledge of precise historical data or even an intense loyalty to the faith of the fathers. Its essential ingredient is an idealized concept of its past which somehow validates the group's current religious status and practice. Such a popular pious tradition might well be beneficial if it contains revitalizing ideas, debilitating if it undergirds religious pride. Almost any dissenting group with a long history tends to be inflexible when dealing with the interpretation of the documents upon which its history is based. A second problem complicating our task of historical reconstruction involves the current status of small group historiography. Thanks to the generosity of sociological and anthropological research we are everywhere beset by sect typologies and small group sys-

tems. We have been shown that sects have distinguishable profiles, that they usually generate ethnic groups, and that ethnic groups are characterized by a deep consciousness of their own special identity. We have been told that, whether sectarian or ethnic, a given group's behaviour and reaction pattern is rather predictable.¹ For the historian small group models only become distressing if it is assumed they can be taken back in time to fully explain century-old historical events. The historian still naively assumes the uniqueness of each historical situation and seeks to work from the evidence which the situation itself supplies.

The Sources

At the turn of the century, when historian P. M. Friesen prepared his far-ranging study of the Russian Mennonites, he penned the following comment concerning the primary sources pertaining to the emergence of the Brethren.

"The material for the inner story, with its light and shadows, is so overwhelmingly numerous that the surviving contemporaries who in part participated in the events can scarcely imagine it. Large numbers of letters, documents, diaries, reminiscences, memoirs etc. are on hand. Especially rich is the collection of letters (his own and those he received) of Johann Claassen of Liebenau, who died in the Kuban."²

Today with little more than a documentary remnant intact, it is difficult to share Friesen's elation. The surviving sources fall into two basic categories. The first encompasses the official correspondence, civic and ecclesiastical, related to the process of secession itself. In all likelihood these latter documents owe their survival to Jacob Mannhardt, editor of the German Mennonite publication, *Mennonitische Blätter*. In 1863, he published some twenty-two documents pertaining to the separatist movement which he received through "the kindness of a dear brother in the Molochnaya settlement."³ Bekker reproduces the Mannhardt material verbatim. P. M. Friesen's presentation of the documents differs somewhat from Bekker's, perhaps be-

cause he had access to other handwritten versions.⁴ The second category of material involves personal memoirs and letters. In the early 1860's Mannhardt published several letters from parties in Russia who had direct contact with or participated in the secession movement.⁵ These provide at least some indication of the climate of public opinion in the South Russian Mennonite colonies during the first years of controversy. The only surviving memoirs are included in the recently published Bekker manuscript, which generally has the flavor of an eye-witness account.⁶ Was there additional material, now lost, which may have expanded our understanding? Elder August Lenzmann of Gnadenfeld, writing in *Mennonitische Blätter*, observed the nonconformists only read *Friedensglocke* and the "mission pamphlets of baptized Christians."⁷ The periodical does not seem to have survived nor do we know anything about the content of the mission pamphlets. Similarly, P. M. Friesen quotes from the diary of one of the dissenters, Jacob Reimer of Gnadenfeld, another source apparently lost to the vicissitudes of time.⁸ For the present we must assume our sources are as complete as they will ever be. How can they be characterized?

1. The majority of the documents reflect the actions and attitudes of a few. A highly stratified, self-contained religious community with a more autocratic power structure than we possibly care to admit, was confronted by a small dissenting group. From the very onset the protest was dealt with in a legal-bureaucratic fashion because it directly affected the ecclesiastical and civic structure of the community. As such it became a personal conflict between establishment and nonconformist leaders. A few determined the stance of the many both during the struggle and for almost a century after. Antagonistic attitudes which separated the mother church and the dissenters for decades were initially based on a series of administrative documents in which the minority cried persecution and the majority cited seditious and unbecoming religious attitudes

and practices. Later stereotypes held by either group were unfortunately based on the assessment of the actual events by a small number of observers and protagonists who left a clear record of their diplomatic strategy and happily included some of their ideological views.

2. Most of the surviving material is singularly in favor of the nonconformists. From an ideological standpoint they represent a plea for freedom of conscience and worship. The secessionists cite their desire for the restoration of such Anabaptist ideals as the believers' church with the appropriate emphasis on baptism and the Lord's Supper. By contrast the opposition offers no refreshing vision. They insist only on maintaining tradition and invoke the aid of civil authorities. The 20th Century Anabaptist, saturated with contemporary free church idealisms as well as the nonconformist visions of his sixteenth century forebearers, instinctively sides with the dissenters. Can we correct the bias of the primary sources? Unfortunately, we don't know what went on in back of the documents. Did some of the Brethren deliberately try to offend the religious conscience of orthodox Mennonitism? Did the new group threaten civic and religious authorities with more than the loss of the Mennonite *privilegium*? Do the documents represent a leadership quarrel or are they indicative of widespread public opinion? At present we possess insufficient interpretations of the quarrel from the contemporaries on both sides. Barring such a comparison of views, caution in assigning a precise degree of bias to the documents may constitute the better part of valor.

3. One further perspective characterizes the documents of 1860. They don't tell us enough about the insides of the people involved. Bureaucratic and administrative in nature, they offer few clues as to the theological-intellectual evolution of the early Brethren or of the extent to which their views were held within the Mennonite community. Was there more to the dispute than religion? Did family quarrels, competition for leadership or personal rivalries affect

the schism? The surviving material provides no answers to such questions.

In approaching the sources we must assume their inherent veracity even if a bias is suspected. If the originators of the documents were crafty men, using religion in a bid for power or to remain in power, their theology was hopelessly apolitical and their strategy badly formulated. Their diplomatic tactics were an unqualified failure. The very naïveté of the dissenters is probably the strongest argument for their sincerity. They were honest about their intentions and we must accept what they had to say about themselves.

The secession document of January 6, 1860, though it begins negatively by attacking the rest of the community as decadent and religiously inferior, adequately reflects a basic dimension in the experience of the early Brethren. In the context of their own circumscribed life style they personally underwent a revolutionary religious upheaval. This upheaval focused upon a tangible conversion; baptism upon the confession of personal faith; a circumspect life of discipleship. The dissenters affirmed a rediscovery of the Anabaptist distinctives contained in the writings of Menno Simons. Their convictions, they asserted, were "in full accord with our beloved Menno Simons".⁹ It seems unduly harsh to dismiss the references to Menno as blatant polemicism. Whether the later struggle between the rebel and the parent has conditioned us to blind loyalty or perpetual cynicism, a dispassionate reading of the secession document can only lead us to the conclusion that the non-conformists of 1860 meant what they said. The ideas they committed to paper constituted the essence of the gospel for them and were liberalizing and exciting.

The secession documents, official in character and limited in ideological scope, provide only selective clues as to the evolution of the Brethren. Even the added perspectives offered by memoirs of the Bekker type can only be adequately understood in the context of the Russian Menno-

nite community of the mid-nineteenth century. In many ways the type of dissent which emerged and the confrontation it produced had its roots inside the structure of that community. What were its salient characteristics?

The Mennonites who left Prussia for Russia at the end of the eighteenth century were already an ethnic group. During their sojourn in Prussia they lived mainly in self-contained villages, relied on agriculture for economic survival, and as historic nonconformists held to their Anabaptist distinctives. Common traditions, beliefs, and language ensured a strong cohesiveness and homogeneity. When the Mennonites arrived in Russia the differences between them and their host society reinforced their isolation and separateness. The economic terms of settlement, by which the village held title to all land within its boundaries, ensured an almost intact transfer of the old social structure. Initially the centralized control which such a land holding system implied, was neutralized by long-standing egalitarian traditions which featured election to both civil and religious office. A strong sense of participatory democracy prevailed since all village property owners voted. Failure to re-elect quickly eliminated capricious or nonresponsive leadership. Then too, migration itself partially disrupted the institutionalized leadership, religious or civic, which had prevailed in Prussia. In the case of early Mennonite settlement in Russia the frontier certainly had a democratizing effect. On the other hand, the circumstances of frontier life made leadership based on community consensus a precarious affair as men like Hoeppner and Barch so unfortunately discovered.¹⁰

Authoritarian Leadership

By the mid-nineteenth century the Mennonite community in South Russia found itself subjected to a more and more centralized form of local government. Basic to the experiences of the Brethren in the early 1860s was the kind of power structure and leadership which had become

acceptable to the Mennonite community as a whole. An "open" society relying on consensus had become "closed" and ruled by an elite. The trend towards a more authoritarian power structure was rooted in two major developments in the Russian Mennonite colonization experience. The first of these was economic and demographic in character. Rapid population increase a few decades after settlement not only absorbed reserve lands but produced an impoverished proletariat as well. What was the impact of this sustained population growth? As of January 1st, 1856, the Molochnaya settlement (48 villages) numbered 17,516; by 1860 it stood at 20,828; in 1865 it reached 24,235. While the total population still stood at 17,516 the colony listed 2,059 landless families compared to 1,188 with land. Assuming an average family size of 5.0 there was only enough land to support a population of 5,940 in a system where indivisible farmsteads were the rule.¹¹ What kind of pressures existed when the population stood at 20,828 or 24,236? We must remember that systematic colonization under the supervision of the mother colony only began in the late 1860s.

Meanwhile in the 1850s the rich became richer and the poor poorer. The agricultural innovations of Johann Cornies (1789-1848) had accrued mainly to the benefit of the landowners and these were now in a position to capitalize on the European demand for Russian grain which developed in the mid-nineteenth century. The capital inflow generated by the new agricultural markets benefited the already affluent and facilitated their further expansion. Naturally this capitalist minority struggled to retain control. Since the right to vote was tied to land holding, power in the Mennonite community devolved to a declining (in relation to the overall population) but economically dominant minority. The landless revolt of the 1850s was not only a protest against economic deprivation, but also against a centralized and authoritarian leadership.¹²

This new type of leadership was not only typified by

the kind of civic tyranny exercised by Johann Cornies, but included an ecclesiastical dimension as well. Adolf Ehrt in his *Das Mennonitentum in Russland* makes the significant observation that by 1850 the landowning class in the older Mennonite settlements was in a position to elect its own members to all ecclesiastical and civic positions. A "Herrschaft der Wirte" (rule of the landowners) subsequently dominated not only the economic but also the religious life of the colonies.¹³ The Mennonite elders, often elected because they were economically self-sufficient and hence served gratuitously, invariably reflected the interests of their class. Obviously the formation of the *Kirchenkonvent* (Council of Elders) sometime before 1850 marked the creation of an ecclesiastic parallel to the kind of civic power exercised by Cornies. Without obtaining community consensus the elders designated their agency as the supreme arbitrator in all religious matters. The diarchy was now complete. Secular officials could now deal with dissent in cooperation with the *Kirchkonvent* or simply instruct this body as to what action should be taken.

It was soon apparent that within the diarchy the church was subjected to the state. The deposition of elder Heinrich Wiens of Margenau in 1847 not only illustrates the nature of the diarchy's operation, but possibly established a precedent for dealing with the 1860 dissent in the Mennonite community. The civil side of the case involved the head of the Supervisory Commission in Odessa during the 1840s, Eduard von Hahn. From the little we know of him he was certainly the tsar's man and did not hesitate to wield his master's power. Elder Wiens had excommunicated several of his members for assisting in the corporal punishment of a youth after they were ordered to do so by the village mayor. The action apparently challenged the jurisdiction of the local civic authorities.¹⁴ Hahn visited Halbstadt on July 20th, 1846 and ordered Wiens to appear before him.¹⁵ Wiens immediately began defending himself on the ground that the Mennonite *Privilegium* guaranteed

religious freedom. He implied that as an elder he had exercised that right. Hahn disagreed. Ministers should not involve themselves in worldly affairs and like others in the community submit to established civic authority. When the elder once more sought to justify his stance Hahn curtly reminded him that he was "only a farmer (Wirt) with 65 dessiatines of land and as a farmer was subject to the mayor (Schulze) and also not exempt from corporal punishment."¹⁶ Turning to the rest of the assembled elders Hahn observed that if they held to Wiens he would make official representations aimed at abolishing the Mennonite *Privilegium*. He expected the elders to show their good faith towards established authority by appropriately dealing with Wiens. On August 14, 1846 Hahn wrote to Mennonite civic leaders in the Molochnaya reiterating that spiritual leaders should not involve themselves in secular affairs and that it was the first duty of every citizen "to obey the authorities appointed by the government."¹⁷

Wiens was not a rabble-rouser. His farewell sermon tells us that.¹⁸ Tactically Wiens may have hurt his cause by his brash talkativeness before von Hahn, but perhaps he won in the end. He would not allow secular authorities to dictate to his religious conscience. Hahn could only answer with threats of imprisonment and physical punishment. The other elders capitulated to civic pressure and deposed Wiens. In doing so they played into the hands of the Mennonite state and established a precedent for dealing with religious nonconformity. Less than two decades later David Friesen, district chairman, felt entirely within his rights when he ordered a close surveillance of the new religious dissenters as though they belonged to a secret society.¹⁹ By then the Mennonite elders accepted their submission to the state without protest. There was no longer a clear line of demarcation between religion and politics. When Friesen requested information regarding the reasons for the secession from the Molochnaya elders in 1860, they cited the dissenters insistence upon personal interpre-

tation of the Scriptures; private observance of the Lord's Supper; the corruption of the existing church. Taking no further note of the religious nature of the protest the elders noted that "Irritations and disorders could emerge if they continue as a free and new religious fellowship", and that "we cannot give our consent to the formation and existence of a free and new religious fellowship within our Mennonite community."²⁰ Then, almost like medieval bishops, they do not wish to specify "what further treatment or punishment be applied" by civil authorities.²¹

Our analysis of mid-nineteenth century Russian Mennonitism has already suggested a second major element contributing to a shift in the Mennonite power structure — the union of church and state. An examination of confessions of faith drafted prior to their departure for Russia suggest that the Prussian Mennonites had not forgotten such historic Anabaptist distinctives as the believers' church, the separation of church and state and nonresistance. In practice, however, these concepts became institutionalized and credalized. Since the terms of Mennonite settlement in Russia eliminated outside pressures by granting virtual autonomy in matters of religion and local government, already tarnished ideals formalized further. An ironic sequel ensued. Historically dissent separated the Mennonites from the rest of society. Once apart they created their own social frame in Prussia as well as Russia, and the *Volkskirche* tradition, against which their forefathers so vigorously protested, became comfortably established within their own midst. The Mennonite church in Russia became co-extensive with society and accepted as members all those within its political and social order. Religious voluntarism, so basic to the Anabaptist-Mennonite past, produced its own social frame in the Russian environment. Functioning within a self-contained system, the Mennonite community was not required to elect a religious or secular stance as the underlying base of its social structure because these interests tended to merge into one.

The Mennonite marriage of church and state remained functional, perhaps even happy, for several decades. As long as either facet was not seriously challenged or forced to survive independently the Mennonite community appeared secure. The prevailing politico-religious system became regarded as sacred and inviolable and any religious nonconformity was interpreted as an attack upon the very fabric of Mennonitism. In a system somewhat akin to that of the Mennonites in Mexico today any deviation, civic or religious, became a major threat. In retrospect it appears ironic that a subjective religious experience involving the independent celebration of the Lord's Supper posed a collective danger and that volost chairman Friesen instinctively invoked his civil authority and the provisions of czarist law to squelch an act of piety. In the Russian Mennonite community once radical religious ideals were molded to fit a narrow ethnic setting. The Mennonites who held religious and political power in 1860 were born, raised and elected to office within a self-contained world. The Mennonite bureaucrats of the era, much like their czarist counterparts, were imprisoned by the genius of their own system and acted instinctively in defense of the only world they knew. Neither group could see beyond the structure which engulfed them. Some of the dissenters of 1860 interpreted the actions of Mennonite leaders as outright persecution directed against the true believers and as the blind hatred of the unrepentent and ungodly. As Bekker expressed it, they were "the associate accomplices of those who persecuted their fathers . . ." ²² Neither party seemed to understand that the tenuous balance between church and state had been fatally undermined when a segment of the community clamoured for religious independence. In the Russian Mennonite world of 1860 the union of church and state created a corporateness which effectively curbed all ideological non-conformity. There was economic totalitarianism as well. In the 1850s well over two-thirds of the Molochnaya Mennonites belonged to a landless proletariat,

who despaired of ever improving their economic lot because the executive power to do so lay in the hands of the affluent minority. What kind of dissent amid this inflexible corporateness could generate greater equitability? Two unrelated episodes may hold some answers to this question.

The first involves the career of an Abraham Thiessen who was exiled to Siberia in 1874; fled to Switzerland in 1876; migrated to the U.S.; returned as a U.S. citizen to Russia and was expelled. His crime: he vindictively fought on behalf of the landless Mennonites against landed Mennonite capitalism. His pamphlets and representations earned him the wrath of the Mennonite and czarist bureaucracy and the praise of the Party of the Peoples Will, the most radical of the Russian revolutionaries in the 1870s and 1880s.^{2 3}

The second relates to the observations of Elder August Lenzmann of Gnadenfeld, a friend of the "brethren" before the 1860 split. With a tinge of polemicism he gave the following description of some Brethren services.

In their worship services there was disorder and capriciousness. Soon this one and then that one, regardless of sex or age, loudly expressed his view or prayed while others expressed their approval with loud shouts like 'Victoria!', 'Gloria!', 'Hallelujah!', or through handclapping jumping and loud laughter At times in their services they made such unnatural tumult with shrieking (shouting), singing, making music, dancing and jumping, that neighbours and passersby came running to see if lives were endangered in the house.^{2 4}

Lenzmann also noted that in Liebenau and Wernersdorf the otherwise sensible Johann Claasen and his friend Cornelius Reimer disturbed the worship services by "winking and smiling to one another during the sermon and usually after the service they addressed the congregation."^{2 5}

The two situations possibly have a common meeting point. Historiographically there is a tendency to express the propertied and minority view of the mid-nineteenth

century Russian Mennonite experience and certainly for this segment there was much sweetness and light. But can we adequately comprehend the totalitarianism which controlled the life of the impoverished Mennonite? He was part of a corporate whole which allowed him no say in his destiny. In this setting might not the early Brethren and Abraham Thiessen have something in common, namely a desire to reassert their individualism? One part was ultimately successful in the religious field, the other failed in the political one. The proletariat struggled for freedom wherever possible and when they achieved it they celebrated boisterously. Certainly some of the behaviour reflected elements of the charismatic and pentecostal but was it not also a rampant individualism protesting the corporate structure dominating Mennonite life? As things turned out, nonconformity was really only viable in the religious field, Inadvertently Lenzmann described the early Brethren as a democratizing movement emphasizing equality and free speech. Almost anyone "loudly expressed his view or prayed."²⁶ He and his contemporaries would have found it difficult to believe that group consensus was a long claimed privilege in the Anabaptist tradition. By 1870 many Mennonites began to find new economic, religious, and political freedom by settling on new frontiers. That alternative did not exist in 1860.

Intellectual and Spiritual Attrition

A second major characteristic of the c.1850 Mennonite setting in Russia related to the deep-seated and widespread intellectual-religious attrition which coincided with the centralization of civic and religious power. In some ways this poverty of the mind and spirit is difficult to explain. Some of the villages were fifty years removed from frontier settlement. Furthermore, the protracted migration from Prussia in the 1820s and 1830s did not consist solely of illiterate peasants. Cultural and especially religious reinforcement came to the Molochnaya settlement in 1835

with the arrival of the Gnadenfeld settlers from Prussia. They brought with them not only the spirituality of pietism and the culture of Prussian Mennonitism, but also a general interest in education. Though their efforts to upgrade standards locally were successful, the colony as such responded slowly. In 1860 education beyond the elementary level was still the privilege of a few since there was only one high school in Halbstadt (founded 1835).

Religious literature capable of bringing change, such as the pietistically inclined works of Arndt, Tersteegen, Jung-Stilling, Ludwig Hofacker and others were known, but evidence for their widespread use and impact is lacking.²⁷ We know that Tobias Voth, teacher at Orloff, was influenced by the writings of Jung-Stilling and left a deep impression on his students, especially on the first elder of the Brethren church, Heinrich Hübner.²⁸ Others like elders Bernhard Fast (Orloff), Peter Wedel (Alexanderwohl) and Franz Goerz (Rudnerweide) corresponded with the Zinzendorf-Herrnhütter bishops in Germany.²⁹ There was perhaps one other "alien" influence prior to 1860. Traveling ministers of Quaker, Baptist or pietistic persuasion sporadically visited the Mennonite colonies as did the representatives of the British and Foreign Bible Society.³⁰ Such visitors provided a periodic encouragement and a revivalistic impetus, but did they exercise a determinative role in the Mennonite community's intellectual and religious evolution?

Periodical literature capable of expanding the spiritual-intellectual horizon of the average villager was virtually nonexistent. In a letter to *Mennonitische Blätter* in 1863 elder Lenzmann noted with some annoyance that the dissenters ignored traditional Christian references like Hofacker, Brastbergen and Stark's *Gebetbuch* and favored the *Friedensglocke* and assorted mission pamphlets.³¹ In addition to these a few copies of *Mennonitische Blätter* were in circulation. It was the Mennonite churchman's lack of broader spiritual exposure that probably concerned elder

Bernhard Harder when he wrote of the "self-satisfied preachers who do nothing in their ministry except read a sermon occasionally, which, together with their position, has been an hierloom in the family for a half or a whole century".³² Until 1860, the literary performance of the Russian Mennonites was not impressive. Until the mid-nineteenth century they had succeeded only in reprinting a songbook and a confession of faith.³³ Other material included a polemical tract in favor of the *Kleine Gemeinde*³⁴ and the purchase from Prussia of an 1834 edition of Menno Simons' *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*.³⁵

A geographic situation may also have influenced intellectual-spiritual awareness of the Molochnaya Mennonites. On January 1, 1856, only ten churches served the 48 villages comprising the settlement. Among these were twelve villages with a population of over 400, yet only four of these had built churches. Villagers in a fifth met in a schoolhouse. A number of colonies had been founded as early as 1804-06 and only nine were established after 1824. Why did some of the larger villages not build churches for 35 or 50 years? Certainly the Prussian *Kirchspiel* idea played a role (i.e. one church serving several communities), but could ten churches adequately serve the needs of 17,516 people? Where did the 321 inhabitants of Lichtfelde go to church? Margenau (built in 1832) some 9¼ versts away or Pordenau (1828) approximately 21 versts distant?³⁶ Even in the 1890s many Mennonites only attended services once a month because the church was too far away. Beside shocking the sensitivities of "twice on Sunday and once in mid-week" North American Mennonites, the "church poverty" of the Russian Mennonites raises some fundamental questions as to the quality of their religious awareness. How often did the average Mennonite receive religious instruction or hear a sermon? What percentage of young people were baptized and on what basis? What kind of religious instruction was offered in the village schools? Did the Russian Mennonite of 1850 know what Menno Simons taught? Where could he find out?

Alien Influences

Many of the elements frequently cited as antecedents of the Brethren movement may well have constituted a quest for a broader intellectual horizon and a deeper religious experience. In mid-nineteenth century Russia others simply had more to offer than the Mennonites. Was the Brethren movement consequently an extension of the religious ferment affecting other German and even Russian groups on the South Russian steppe? How did Stundism with its emphasis on small group Bible study and occasional revivalistic preaching influence a closely knit social group like the Molochnaya Mennonites? What was the effect of German pietism or of the Baptists and Molokans? Did alien elements intrude into the religious thinking of the early Brethren and alter some aspects of their Anabaptist-Mennonite orientation?

Social historian Adolf Ehrt may have erred somewhat when he described the secessionists as being both Baptists and pietistically inspired.³⁷ Certainly the presence of these two religious streams might imply a relationship and a relationship might affect a realignment or a shift in identity. On the other hand, interaction between two groups need not bring substantial change. Bekker, displaying the naïveté which so enhances his memoir as a primary document, makes short work of the Baptist question. He notes that on January 6, 1860, "we did not know any Baptists, nor did we know that there were any Baptists in the world."³⁸ He goes on to say, "we were ignorant of and knew nothing about baptism by immersion until the first Sunday of September, 1860, when the question concerning baptism arose."³⁹ Bekker then lists a pamphlet on baptism given him by Johann Claassen, his own study of Menno Simons' *Fundamentals* and the concensus of some of the Brethren as determinative in his decision to baptize by immersion.⁴⁰ He is careful to point out that the initiative for Baptist-Brethren contact was an outgrowth of Baptist imperialism, inspired in part as Bekker sees it, by Oncken's

ordination of Abram Unger in the Chortitza colony.⁴¹ Bekker's account cites one other instance of foreign "influence" upon the religious practices of the early Brethren. Fellowshiping with the Molokans they found the spiritual kiss practiced heterosexually. At first the Mennonite women, displaying their traditional modesty and no doubt afraid of bearded men, fled the scene. Later "our women did not withdraw timidly for the welcoming salutation" nor did the sister kiss "remain completely innocent."⁴² With some difficulty the Brethren later got "rid of this practice."⁴³

The ministry of pietist Eduard Wuest is traditionally considered determinative in the early theological evolution of the Brethren.⁴⁴ In dealing with this problem it is important to recall the widespread religious ferment criss-crossing the South Russian steppes in previous decades. The fact is that some residents of the Molochnaya were pious before Wuest arrived. The Gnadenfeld Temperance Union had sought to deal with the liquor problem; Bernhard Fast had been active in Orloff; the Templars had seen their vision of Jerusalem; Tobias Voth had organized fellowship groups, mission meetings, and a Christian literary society. Pietist Wuest was something of a latecomer to the scene. His ministry began indirectly via Mennonites who came under his influence in Berdyansk and then moved to the Molochnaya. Here, as Mennonite religious zealots they became *Stunden-gaenger* (Meeting-goers), temperance advocates, mission conference promoters and, if a Women's Missionary Society is indicative, they contributed to the partial liberation of the Mennonite woman. These activities, though occasionally reinforced by Wuest's visits, were indigenous to the community.

The Wuest saga raises an obvious but difficult question. Did external religious pressures in 1860 assimilate a somewhat stagnant Anabaptism or did Anabaptism use these to suit its own purposes? In seeking an answer we should remember that the alien influences were not necessarily an-

tagonistic to a Mennonite theology which stressed separation from the world (including *Volkskirche*) and the necessity of individually appropriating faith. We must not only allow for occasional ideological compatibility but try to determine how extensive and intensive the theological brainwashing really was. As we have seen, the evidence is rather circumstantial. The Molochnaya settlement of 1860 experienced limited social mobility. Mennonite young men were not yet forced to leave the community for state service nor were members of the Mennonite intelligentsia being sent to Germany for theological study or to Russian universities for professional and technical training. The divisive literature needed to undergird a substantial ideological shift among leaders and followers alike simply did not exist.

The evidence which can be cited for alien religious influences upon the early Brethren ultimately focuses on one question. Were the forces of continuity stronger than the forces of change? On the whole the movement did not demonstrate the characteristics normally associated with revolution. There was no cataclysmic or overt action generating radical political and social change. The secession document was not a drastic innovation radically altering existing institutions and society. Most of the religious experiences precious to the nonconformists were rooted in the spiritual legacy of their own community. Why not speak of the evolution of the Brethren? Why not argue for the element of continuity in 1860? Certainly this minimizes the uniqueness of the Brethren as religious innovators, but would it not be historically more honest? Were the religious quests of Mennonites in the 1840s and 1850s qualitatively different from the one which officially surfaced on January 6, 1860? They were all subjective spiritual pilgrimages evolving amidst an intense, restricted fellowship with like-minded villagers. The early Brethren, like the groups which preceded them, were basically interested in the personal enjoyment of religion and few were con-

cerned as to where their group activity might ultimately lead them. In the early stages their theological evolution was gradual and flexible and certainly not without error. In their initial quest, which began well before 1860, the dissenters did not consciously rebel against the prevailing structure, for their experience was inward-looking consisting of Bible study and prayer. A stated theology was probably incidental to experience.

In South Russia the Anabaptist legacy had a welcome though not always beneficial ally—the closed ethnic community. Did the individuals or groups who flirted with pietism in the 1840s and 1850s lose their ethnic consciousness or characteristics? Was the imported piety able to force basic changes in the prevailing belief and social structure? Knowing what we do today about the character of closed ethnic communities and their tenacious interest in self-preservation, however, it seems doubtful that even decades of pietistic influence substantially changed the colonist either before or after he joined the Brethren. Unfortunately, the chief bulwark against foreign influence also contained some elements which were self-destructive. For many ethnicity meant orthodoxy. A conservative leadership resolved to maintain the status quo and allowed no further re-examination of the community's Anabaptist heritage. The dissenters, rejected by the majority, cast about in search of their own Mennonite identity. Their quest was not singularly free of shadows. By celebrating a private communion they generated a cleavage within the Mennonite community which all but terminated the quietistic, evolutionary renewal of the past decades. In the confrontation which followed some aspects of renewal suffered a setback.

Premature Institutionalization

When the Brethren by a public act focused upon the restoration of the believers church, with its judicious practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper, they inadvertently

challenged the flexibility of the traditional Mennonite social structure. Why should the pious activities of a few threaten the entire community? Perhaps as in Luther's day a *Volkskirche* based upon a historic creedalism and embracing the entire community could not be expected to allow an independent group to flourish without defining itself. Religious renewal had barely begun for the dissenters when establishment pressures demanded they formalize their belief structure. In some ways this was fatal to the movement. The religious revolution had barely begun when its ideas were written down. Its theology was no longer evolving, dynamic or flexible. In a sense the Brethren substituted a creed for a gospel and their secession document already constituted a preamble to a confession of faith. A fixed structure replaced experience. Their protest against *Volkskirche* was in part neutralized as the new group fought for its place in the Mennonite world. A non-conformity born out of the dynamic of renewal all too quickly changed into a dissenting group with well defined ethical standards, a piety demonstratable in the community context, and a theology which soon generated dogma out of such newly discovered experiential truths as the new birth and baptism. By forcing the renewal movement of 1860 to define itself almost at the moment of its birth, the Russian Mennonite community encouraged an orthodox stance on the part of the Brethren which squelched some dimensions that had been spiritually life-giving.

This premature concern with the delineation of doctrine had one unfortunate result. The group began to conceive of itself as different and unconsciously set out to prove it. A refreshing emphasis on the church of the brotherhood shifted to an emphasis on the separated church. Within a historic dissenting community, already ethnically isolated by the legal terms of its settlement in Russia, there emerged another group whose definition on nonconformity included separation from its own society. The early Brethren left one type of separation to generate another. When

required to formulate a dogmatic basis for their stance, they took up a somewhat defensive, inward-looking position. Religious conversion seemed more dynamic than the faith achieved by a memorized catechism. It followed that the new baptism was more valid than the old and the new ethics more Christian than those practiced by the rest of Mennonitism. Out of the defensive stance of the early Brethren there gradually emerged the feeling that they were qualitatively better, religiously speaking, than the members of the old church. Historically this proved to be a most fatal legacy, separating the rebels from the parent community for generations.

We have argued that the early doctrines of the Brethren especially the new birth and baptism on faith were prematurely institutionalized. This does not suggest that their dynamic was suddenly lost and their effectiveness ended. It may well imply, however, that certain innovative teachings which directed the Russian Mennonites to neglected aspects of their Anabaptist heritage now became a set of tenets undergirding an institution. What had been revolutionary ideas in the lives of individuals now became a part of the fabric of loyalties towards an institution. The definition of certain doctrines tended to become sacrosanct.

A Revolution of the Poor?

One final dimension in our concern with Brethren origins deserves brief attention. Was it essentially a movement of the Mennonite poor? If some church registers designating the occupations of members had survived, answers to the question could be based on concrete data instead of inferences. Some information does exist. Bekker in his inimitable and uncontrived manner supplies some chance references. There was "Herman Peters the drummer",⁴⁵ who was really a carpenter. Others included Johann Claassen who, at what seemed to be a moment's notice, bought a "closed model carriage"⁴⁶ to go to Kharkov; a Russian servant girl in Gnadenheim who helped convert the local

pub owner;⁴⁷ "a landlord in the pastor's parish,"⁴⁸ converted in a prayer meeting in the Saratov area; the shopkeeper Jakob Mathies, whose wife physically attacked Bekker;⁴⁹ a number of schoolteachers not identified by name;⁵⁰ finally a Gnadenfeld minister who identified with the nonconformists before the split, who "although he was the wealthiest materially"⁵¹ had the confidence of the young people. Such evidence suggests the Brethren attracted a rather broad cross-section of society into their ranks. On the other hand, the majority of the Brethren who moved to the Kuban belonged to the "poorer and the poor".⁵² The Kuban colonists did not, of course, represent all of the adherents of the Brethren. It was natural that the opening of a new frontier attracted mainly the landless.

Currently there is little additional information available on the economic status of the Brethren adherents. An inference from general studies on the nature of reform and revolution may provide a helpful perspective on the problem. There is widespread scholarly agreement that change or reform in history is rarely fomented by the very rich or the very poor. Usually a diverse socio-economic group known as the "middle class" is involved. Literacy, leisure, and the lack of strong vested interests seem to provide a fertile soil for the growth of new ideas. Mennonite society in Russia featured the very rich and the very poor. The former held to the status quo while the latter were helpless victims of a highly stratified system. It is interesting that those who fought most vigorously against the group dominating the system, men like Johann Claassen, were not penniless paupers nor were they ignorant men intellectually speaking. Piety in 1860 was not the prerogative of any class, but relatively few had sufficient knowledge of the tactics needed to launch what appeared to conservative contemporaries as a revolution. Beautiful as the concept of a proletarian revolution may appear to some, such a movement rarely occurs in human history. The poor participate

only after the upheaval has been launched by others. Certainly the anger of the poor and the religious quest of the pious coincided in the 1850s and 1860s but it does not follow that a distinct cause and effect relationship existed. It was difficult to distinguish between the economic and religious revisionist as Mennonite civic and religious leaders found out. There is no evidence which proves the landless joined the brethren in large numbers. If seventy per cent of the early Brethren belonged to that class it would only indicate proportionate representation, since approximately that number belonged to the landless.

In 1860 a "left wing" crystalized in the Russian Mennonite community. That community had become oligarchical and economically elitist in its civil-ecclesiastical leadership. Because church and state had inadvertently united, the community as such became vulnerable to agitation for structural change from either side. Civilly the demand of the Mennonite poor for land brought tensions to an all-time high by 1860. Then a private act of piety by a few, the commemoration of the Lord's Supper, precipitated a struggle which ultimately eroded the power of the landed Mennonite gentry, civil and religious. Both the landless and the Brethren questions were ultimately settled by czarist decree. The community setting amidst which the renewal movement emerged was simply less sacred than Brethren tradition might wish. There was rebellion against conventional spirituality and traditional forms of authority. The assertion of simplistic faith by Mennonite villagers from all walks of life deeply penetrated the prevailing social structure. Renewal produced alienation within families as well as considerable persecution and suffering. The early Brethren were deeply convinced that God worked in all circumstances. In his memoirs, Bekker piously reports how he was attacked by the angry wife of a new convert and with equal sobriety mentions Hermann Peters the drummer, whose desire for syncopation in hymn singing alienated him from his coreligionists. Its inherent earthi-

ness might be one of the strongest arguments for the validity of the 1860 new life movement.

In the surviving sources there is little precise information on the "inner" ideological evolution of the Brethren. Most of the documents record "official theology" rather than descriptions of the group's "heart-throb." Had the participants been in a position to objectively analyze their experiences they may have cited some Pietism, some Anabaptism and most certainly some Divine Intervention. The end product, religiously speaking, was most applicable to their particular background and life setting. Like many renewal movements, the early Brethren were vulnerable to alien pressure, fragmentation, emotionalism and inevitable institutionalization. Fortunately, in the process of their emergence and maturation the Brethren emphasized such Anabaptist distinctives as the believers' church and the life of discipleship. Together with the rest of the Russian Mennonite community they would rediscover their historic pacificism in the 1870s and 1880s.

NOTES

1. The sect typology of Ernst Troeltsch and the subsequent debates which his assertions generated fill many volumes. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1960) 2:691ff. Names like Robert Redfield, Brian Wilson, and J. W. Bennett are standard in the field. An especially useful definition of the term ethnic is contained in the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, *The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), vol. 4.
2. P. M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Brüderschaft in Russland, 1789-1910* (Halbstadt: Verlagsgesellschaft Raduga, 1911), p. 165.
3. "Die Separatistischen Bewegungen in Süd-Russland," *Mennonitische Blätter* 10 (February 1863): 11-16.
4. In the case of the secession document of January 6, 1860, he notes its publication in *Mennonitische Blätter* and observes that it is available in "various handwritten copies." Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, p. 189.
5. *Mennonitische Blätter* 9 (March 1862): 24; *Menno-nitische Blätter* 9 (October 1862): 53-54.
6. Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kans.: The Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1973).
7. A. Lenzmann, "An den herausgeber," *Mennonitische Blätter* 9 (May 1863): 25.
8. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, p. 203.
9. Bekker, *Origin*, p. 44.
10. The best study of early Mennonite settlement in Russia can still be found in David G. Rempel "The Mennonite Colonies in New Russia: A Study of their Settlement and Economic Development from 1789-

- 1914," (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1933).
11. J[acob] Martens, "Statistische Mittheilungen über die *Mennoniten-Gemeinden* im südlichen Russland," *Mennonitische Blätter* 4 (May 1857): 33. Adolf Ehrt cites 5.18 as the average family size in *Das Mennonitentum in Russland* (Berlin: Julius Beltz, 1932), p. 54.
 12. On the landless struggle see Franz Isaak, *Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten* (Halbstadt: Druck von H. J. Braun, 1908), pp. 27-86.
 13. Ehrt, *Das Mennonitentum*, p. 49. The power of the rich is also reflected in the autobiography "Heinrich Hesse (1787-1868)," trans., Cornelius Krahn, *Mennonite Life* 24 (April 1969): 66-72.
 14. Isaak, *Die Molotschnaer*, pp. 117-121.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
 17. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-116. "What did the congregation of the church Elder Wiens do? It became involved in an affair which had no connection with the spiritual office; it condemned people whose only fault lay in the fact that they, in accord with their duty and conscience, proffered their obedience to those in authority:" *Ibid.*, p. 115.
 18. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, pp. 119-128.
 19. Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 50-51.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 56. The dominance of civic power remained until 1865, when David Friesen ended his term as district chairman. The landless dispute, brought to a head by government intervention in 1866, further helped to discredit the civic leadership in the Mennonite community. In the early 1870's when russification pressures threatened the Mennonites with forceful military conscription, the church elders

once more figured prominently in the leadership of the community and became the focal points of the emigration movement.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 57. Some years ago Robert Kreider made a very significant contribution to the understanding of the Mennonite Church in Russia in his article "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment, 1789-1870," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 25 (January 1951): 17-33. Taking the view that the Mennonite Church in the Russian environment took on many of the characteristics associated with the *Volkskirche* concept, Kreider asserted that the emigrants coming out of Prussia brought with them "a quietistic, non-missionary Mennonitism which sought to preserve an historic faith by formalistic, tradition-honoured means." p. 21. Once in Russia "they accepted a system of privileges which were bound to qualifications, not of faith, but of blood." p. 22.
22. Bekker, *Origin*, p. 55.
23. On Thiessen's career see Cornelius Krahn, "Abraham Thiessen: A Mennonite Revolutionary?," *Mennonite Life* 24 (April 1969): 73-77. Also Abraham Thiessen, *Die Agrarwirren bei den Mennoniten in Sued-Russland* (Berlin: Selbstverlag, 1887), and *Die Lage der deutschen Kolonisten in Russland* (Leipzig: Robert Hoffmann, 1876).
24. Lenzmann, "An den Herausgeber," pp. 33-34.
25. *Ibid.*; Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, pp. 335-336.
26. Lenzmann, "An den Herausgeber," pp. 33-34.
27. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, pp. 40-41 cites a long list of Baptist and pietistic authors known to the Russian Mennonites and in part responsible for spiritual renewal among them. In his book, however, only two or three individuals are mentioned as having been specifically influenced by say, Hofacken, before 1860 (237-240). Many of the authors mentioned

played a significant role in the nurture of lay piety as late as the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-119.
30. Ehrh makes a strong case for Brethren contact with outside groups, *Das Mennonitentum*, pp. 56-61. But did such interaction imply as substantial a shift in identity as he implies? Geographic proximity; visiting delegations at conferences; the conversion and baptism of isolated Russians; a few leaders trained in Baptist schools; communion fellowship; an occasional Mennonite joining the Baptists—do events of this nature occurring over several decades really change the members of a closed ethnic community. James Urry, researching the archives of the British and Foreign Bible Society cites evidence of Mennonite contact with the Society as early as 1821, Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), pp. 171ff. The Quakers William Allen and Stephen Grellet visited the Molochnaya Mennonites in 1819. Their ministry found a widespread response. Richenda C. Scott, *Quakers in Russia* (London: Michael Joseph, 1964), pp. 113ff. The Russian Mennonites had lived with alien influences of the Wuest variety for more than three decades without substantially changing their theological outlook.
31. Lenzmann, "An den Herausgeber," p. 33.
32. "Aus einem Briefe an den Herausgeber aus Südrussland," *Mennonitische Blätter* 9 (October 1862): 53-54.
33. In 1853 the Rudnerweide church reprinted the Friesisch-Flämisches Confession of 1660.
34. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische*, p. 111 cites Abr. Friesen, *Eine Einefache Erklärung über einige Glaubenssätze der sogenannten kleinen Gemeinde* (Danzig: Druck der Gerhardschen Offizin, 1845).

35. Bekker reports using the *Foundations* during the early years of the M. B. church. Peter van Riesen published Menno's *Foundations* in Danzig in 1834. Because of local pressure the edition was withdrawn in Prussia. A good number of copies were sold to the Russian Mennonites.
36. Martens, "Statistische Mittheilungen," p. 33; "Alphabetische Übersicht über die Entfernung der Kolonien des Molotschnaer Mennoniten-Bezirks: 1846," insert in Isaak, *Die Molotschnaer*.
37. Ehrt uses the term " pietistischen Bruderbewegung," *Das Mennonitentum*, p. 57.
38. Bekker, *Origin*, p. 179.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.
41. "Because they succeeded in doing this service (ordaining Abraham Unger) among us, they now proceeded on the presumption that all was accomplished under the Baptist umbrella, and hence were entitled to make known that the Mennonite Brethren Church is a product of their work," *Ibid.*, p. 182.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
43. *Ibid.*
44. See A[braham Jakob] Kröker, *Pfarrer Eduard Wuest, der grosse Erweckungsprediger in den deutschen Kolonien Südrussland* (Leipzig: H. G. Wallmann, 1903).
45. Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 84-85.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97, 101. Two teachers signed the secession document, p. 80.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
52. H[einrich] Friesen and C[ornelius] P. Toews, *Die Kubaner Ansiedlung* (Steinbach, Manitoba: Echo-Verlag, 1953), p. 17.

III

MENNONITE BRETHREN AND OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA— SOME REFLECTIONS, INTERPRETATIONS AND VIEWPOINTS

Clarence Hiebert

Who are the Mennonite Brethren? What have they become in North America through this past century? Why? The task at hand is to take aspects of John A. Toews' *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* as a springboard for some evaluating.

The Interpreters of Mennonite Brethren

An incomplete catalogue of "labels" that have been used to describe Mennonite Brethren at various times and places and by various people supplies some interpretations and evaluations: pietists, immersionists, millennialists, Baptists, literalists, legalists, enthusiasts, fundamentalists, separatists, conversionists, dogmatists, dispensationalists, individualists, revivalists, naive Biblicists, experientialists, evangelists, and conservatives.

How is one to interpret Mennonite Brethren history? The author of the newly published book writes as an "insider" and, though he does detour some negative aspects, the Mennonite Brethren are generally viewed positively—perhaps too positively and uncritically. There are alternate interpretations. There are some "insiders" who are much more critical. There are also "insiders" who chose the Mennonite Brethren because of particular emphases. Their appraisal is often highly complimentary. There are ex-Mennonite Brethren who chose to leave their ranks; they also make evaluations, and these are generally less complimentary. Members of other Mennonite groups have observed and evaluated our development from their similar Anabaptist past. There is considerable variation of favorable and unfavorable response. Various non-Mennonite publics have

observed and assessed us as well as other similar religious movements. They look at things psychologically, sociologically, theologically, historically, politically or philosophically, studying factors such as stress, milieu, era, relationships, ideas, and the interplay of whatever forces there may be in various given moments of history in order to determine the *Sitz im Leben* that gives rise to the phenomena observed.

The Mennonite Brethren Secession

Mennonite Brethren beginnings in Russia have been identified by some with the economic struggle of the poor, the landless among the Mennonite lower strata. The solution to their struggle, it is contested, came in a cataclysmically experienced conversion and the establishment of a new movement stimulated by several external religious influences of that environment: Moravians, Baptists, Lutheran Pietists. For the main-line Mennonites of South Russia (sometimes referred to as *Kirchliche* or *Grosse Gemeinde*) from which this group seceded, membership had traditionally been defined as a result of "a plain inner decision to accept Christ." Mennonite Brethren, however, saw in many of them no sincere Christ-acceptance or following. To them, their own past church membership was recalled as a nominal, socially approved, automatic, catechism-learning ritual. From the contending positions emerged (1) an emotional, sometimes "self-righteous" Mennonite Brethren; (2) a defensive, sometimes anathema-hurling, traditional main-line Mennonite; and (3) Mennonites between these two polarizations who expressed concerns about the evident decay in main-line Mennonitism, but disappointment and even disgust with the emerging "holier-than-thou" Mennonite Brethren.

Some of these feelings were still strongly felt nearly two decades later when 18,000 of these Mennonites relocated to North America. The most traditional and conservative (8,000 of them) settled in Manitoba. None of these Mani-

tobans were Mennonite Brethren. Most of the main-line Mennonites that came to the U.S.A. ultimately joined the General Conference of Mennonites (an American, John Oberholtzer-led group, 1860 ff.). Very few immigrants joined any of the other existing "American Mennonite" groups. Virtually all of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren came over together in one group and settled together largely as they had in Russia. Mennonite Brethren, on the other hand, came in fragmented, small, leaderless groups. It was not until 1879 that they had a sense of cohesion as a group. The main-line Mennonite immigrants tended to continue to regard the conversion-emphasizing groups (M.B. and K.M.B.) as culturally inferior, economically poorer, educationally less advanced, theologically more naive, psychologically more emotional, sociologically less adjusted, and situationally more gullible to the prevalent pietistic and revivalist moods sweeping the western world. These kinds of feelings ran so strong at some places that some of the main-line fellow immigrants regarded Mennonite Brethren as defectors from their traditional Mennonite heritage. The Mennonite Brethren themselves, however, viewed their 1860 experience as a major spiritual breakthrough and a return to the true emphases of Menno—emphases such as a necessity for a new birth, followed by a life of fruitfulness which attested to the reality of their Christ-experience.

It is true that there was some "wild" fanaticism among Mennonite Brethren in Russia in the early years. Unfortunately, some of their accusers chose to highlight these fanatic elements and picture them as typical of most Mennonite Brethren. In this respect, parallels can be drawn between fanatic elements of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, which tarnished the moderates, and the exaggerations which characterized a few of the Mennonite Brethren converts in the early years of their existence.

By the "insiders" for whom this much-needed spiritual experience came in their moment of crisis only subjective

analyses were made. Their holy moment elicited descriptions such as: miraculous, heavenly, indescribable, wonderful, marvelous, fantastic! The assessments of those from whom they had defected were: ridiculous, silly, gullible, naive, radical, foolish! "Hallelujahs" and curses were cross-fired, bringing frustration and confusion to those sorting out the pros and cons more objectively. Some realized the need for dialogue, reforms, repentance, and reconciliation—but the air was too charged with disagreement for much of this to happen.

The Complexity of Analyzing

A complexity of variables occurs at any given moment in history. An attempt to understand and to decide whether to reject or to participate in the newly offered option gives rise to a dilemma. The choice must make sense in each person's *Sitz im Leben*. To rejectors no rational explanation makes sense. To the participants, on the other hand, all seems to make sense. It is becoming increasingly evident that even stated reasons for either participation or rejection are not sufficient for objective analysts seeking the actual reasons. Probing into that 1860 "moment" in Russia has other possible causes than the usually stated "official reasons." It would be interesting and worthwhile to know how much of the dynamic came from less easily identified pushes such as economics, prestige, kinship attachments, political forces, etc. How much was "holy" or "unholy?" Or, more problematic still, how much was an alloy of holy and unholy reasons and then defended or explained in "spiritual terms?" Rationalization, if needed, can be formulated conveniently for both participants and rejectors of newly discovered options. Systems, institutions, programs, organizations, and power hierarchies have been rationalized into or out of existence with emotionally-loaded, stance-justifying, "spiritual" language.

That some course correction was needed by Russia's Mennonites cannot be doubted. The meaning of that

course correction then and for subsequent generations raises another important inquiry. A statement of Christ-faithfulness and restoration in one era can become so overwhelmingly central in the continuation of a movement that it becomes a "course perversion" as time goes by. A correct emphasis of one era and situation can be advocated so insistently that new course corrections to even more basic and fundamental Kingdom of God matters are neglected. Can this be the case of Mennonite Brethren in their 115-year history? Important creedal, practical, experiential, methodological correctness, carefully spelled out in the language and situation of a given time, does not assure subsequent generations of meaningful answers or directives. "Brittleness" of this kind is dangerous since it usually stifles Biblio-centric aliveness. Doctrine, polity, tradition, organization—rather than the Word of God—become the final court of appeal where "holy matters" have been announced as "settled forever." It is evident that God has met and touched people in significant and specific ways in many situations. It is also evident that He wishes to do so for all men, everywhere, in ways appropriate to each situation. Historians can report such happenings, but neither historians nor theologians must prescribe the specifics of the when, where, why, how of such "holy moments." Each has its own uniqueness.

From the Russian to the American Setting

The Russian *Sitz im Leben* which gave rise to the Mennonite Brethren Church was complex with many cross currents. In less than two decades, Mennonite Brethren were transplanted to the North American frontier in a new setting with even more complex cross currents. The announced Russification had threatened all Mennonites—the main-line group as well as the renewalists. It meant de-Germanizing and de-traditionalizing Russia's foreign, ethnic-bound citizenry. North America, however, promised these threatened ones a frontier on which life could go on as it

had before with seemingly unlimited rights to live in the desired isolation in order to maintain their distance from "the world" in their *Stillen im Lande* stance. Relocation was explained in religious terms—"for conscience sake." Specifically, it was the compulsory military service threat that became the most plausible explanation. Poverty was another reason—given particularly by those who were landless and for whom the pinch of poverty was intensifying among the rapidly expanding, land-hoarding, wealthier Mennonites.

With the intention of re-establishing isolationistic *Strassendörfer* in North America, a religiously conservative, socially ghettoized, poorly educated, and poverty-stricken segment of Russia's Mennonite populace set out with rather utopian expectations of what the new frontier held in store. Others came too—for the excitement of a new frontier, for even greater wealth-gathering opportunities and, for some, as an acceptable way to exit from tense community and family situations in Russia.

That things did not turn out as utopian and favorable as some had fantasied is evident from reports of the earliest settlers. Many discouraging circumstances played a significant part in those first years—the barrenness of the countryside, the difficulty of securing housing for harsh winters, the destruction of vegetation in the grasshopper invasions, and the desperate loneliness of being separated from families, friends, and former church leaders.

In the midst of these disheartening experiences, a number of them responded to the kind of emphasis which Mennonite Brethren had found meaningful in times of crisis. Perhaps this, in part, explains why there was such a large number of conversions and joining of Mennonite Brethren ranks during the first two decades after their arrival in America. It wasn't long before virtually every immigrant Mennonite community also had conversion-emphasizing members other than Mennonite Brethren.

Americanization — New Insights

Russia's Mennonite *Strassendörfer* arrangement was soon abandoned in the U.S.A. as undesirable in their new setting. With this move, the Americanization of the immigrant Mennonites began. Stresses and strains accompanied the process with the lures of "worldliness" threatening to undermine precisely that for which they had emigrated from Russia. As long as they were relatively isolated, the socialization of subsequent generations could be continued in a controlled environment. In the midst of the world-stream, however, option after option was introduced to the young and curious pioneering Mennonite. In the process he made some new discoveries: (1) German people and their culture were not necessarily superior to others as they had been taught to believe in Europe. (2) Mennonites did not have the most advanced farming techniques and equipment. Some Americans did better. (3) Many other Christian denominations, movements, and leaders weren't as heretical as they had been described by their trusted forebears and leaders. (4) Mennonites did not have to apologize for their existence in America. They were accepted and loved. They had a right to their own views and their commitments. (5) All of the traditional emphases of Mennonites were not necessarily religious. Some were "cultural baggage" and not central to Christ-commitment. (6) The evangelistic/revivalist phenomenon didn't always lead to fanaticism, abuses or Pharasaism. In America it was generally viewed more favorably.

Adjusting to Americanization

All of this, and more, challenged the authority of both the teachings and the methods of the heretofore trusted leaders (usually ministers) of the community. New ways had to be found and were found—particularly in the establishment of schools. Some of the needed control was provided and served in dependable ways during the transition:

attempts to retain German, to discourage living away from Mennonite concentrations, to provide acceptable German, Mennonite authored or scrutinized literature, to retain contact with the trusted Russian Mennonite leadership.

In another way the relocation process was an unsettling experience for the immigrant Mennonites. The "American Mennonites," very much like themselves, they had thought, proved to be quite different—so different, in fact, that they seldom worshipped together. In the Russian setting, most Mennonites had lived among "their own kind" in villages. In the closely settled, new Mennonite communities like Kansas and Manitoba, there was more diversity, and differences loomed very large—large enough so that they established entirely separate places of worship and education and insisted on marriage only with "their own kind." Dialect, dress, life-style, educational interests/disinterests, etc., brought a whole set of identifying labels to the fore distinguishing "my kind" from "your kind." They referred to these different kinds: Molotschna, Karolswalde, Prussian, Michaliner, Volhynia Swiss, Krimmer, Volga, Chortitza, Bergthaler, Kleine Gemeinde, Old Colony, etc. Furthermore, many of the groups were identified ethnically or religiously with a prominent leader, usually a minister. They said they "belonged to" a group led by Schrag, Buller, Schellenberg, Peters, Wall, Unruh, Wiebe, Tschetter, Friesen, Toews, or Eckert, etc. Though they all called themselves Mennonites, they tended to keep each other at arm's length.

Mennonite Brethren also had these indications of strata in their ranks. The Marion County, Kansas, group, for example, was made up of a mixture of Molotschna, Krimmer and Volga people. Some of the Volga immigrants had joined the Mennonite Brethren in Russia from a lethargic, nominally Lutheran or Reformed tradition. They did not speak Molotschna low-German, were described as "excitable" in nature, and were often literalists in their response to Scriptural injunctions. The most tense public issue of

the Molotschna-Volga interaction was the insistence of the Volga segment that Christians, men and women alike, greet each other with a "holy kiss" in accordance with New Testament teachings. The Molotschna people objected. Similar tensions were evident between the Molotschna and the Volga people in Nebraska. It was discussed at the early conference sessions and the Volga people lost out. One sensed that the issue was larger than the "holy kiss" exchange. A complex maze of other undercurrents seem evident. One can almost hear the Molotschna folks saying things like: "Are these Volga people really Mennonites at all? Will we get into another 'Fröhliche Richtung' if we let this go on? Are their assertions really Scriptural—can they be trusted to understand God's Word correctly? If we give in on this, will they usurp leadership and bring about other teachings and practices of 'their own kind' alien to our tradition?" In one sense it was a testing point of how brotherly the new Mennonite Brethren group really could be across heretofore resisted "our kind/your kind" barriers in this new movement.

The founding of the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church includes some of this element as well. There was apparently no original Mennonite Brethren nucleus there. Among the *Kirchliche* immigrant Polish French Creek congregation, known as the Johannestal church, a number of people had a cataclysmic conversion. Within ten miles of this Hillsboro group, in 1881, there were two other conversion-emphasizing groups: the Gnadenau Krimmer Mennonite Brethren with their vigorous, much loved leader, Jacob A. Wiebe, and Eckert's Mennonite Brethren Church at Ebenfeld. Within 20 miles of Hillsboro there was a very lively conversionist-group (Lone Tree) being formed in McPherson County under revivalist John Holdeman's leadership. Yet the French Creek newly converted group chose to by-pass Gnadenau, Ebenfeld and Lone Tree to ask for leadership in both baptizing and church organization from Elder Abraham Schellenberg some 60 miles away at the

Ebenezer Mennonite Brethren Church in Reno County. Why did they do so? Was it the identification with this ethnic group that they found more compatible, or was it the authority which Schellenberg had as an ordained elder from Russia?

The assimilation of the Volga converts in both Kansas and Nebraska fared rather poorly by and large. Some contended that they were mostly unstable people. The fact that in the course of one generation some of them, original Ebenfelders, shifted denominational allegiances four times: Lutheran, Mennonite Brethren, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, provided verification of this instability.

Religious Permissiveness on the Frontier

The recently founded Mennonite Brethren Church and the Americanization process combined forces to give a new kind of individual and group permissiveness to people that had heretofore been bound by predominantly traditional ways. They firmly believed that they had discovered something new and significant. In the American setting they soon learned that there were other American Christian movements that could attract adherents with the same kind of impulse, though with other variations of emphasis. This included especially the denominations that were particularly powerful on the frontier such as Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists. Some other Mennonites were attracted to Swedenborgianism.

This permissive era, with its revivalist methodology and the re-thinking of tradition, provided traditionalist-bent leaders with fuel for warnings about heresy and danger on the horizon. The many varieties of enthusiastic religious outbursts in America with their "come-outerism" ("Come ye out from among them and be ye separate saith the Lord") resulted in rampant sectarianism. Appraisals of the movements of this era vascillate between praise and blame, shame and glory, dishonor and fame. On the one hand, course corrections were needed as many asserted, even

among most main-line traditional churches, but the abuses and rationalizations that transpired in the name of renewal efforts, along with the ill-will generated, represent the other side of the appraisal. Defectors from most main-line traditionalist groups felt disinheritation and alienation—often from their closest associates. Many “come-outers” suffered deeply in making such radical commitments. Their suffering, however, furnished them with further dynamic and substantiation of the rightness of their move. Had not Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake?”

This attitude of deeply felt “rightness” constituted part of the problem that developed among the “come-outers.” If what they had experienced, thought, and become was God-given, then many of them felt they were beyond criticism from anybody. The Holy Spirit was leading them, they asserted. God was on their side. Both sensitivity and insensitivity could be seen. Some observers, though attracted by aspects of the renewal they witnessed, were also often repulsed by the Pharisaism which typified some within the ranks of the “revived.” This made the sorting out process for the would-be joiners all the more difficult. Was the new movement all good or all bad? Was it all that the joiners said it was? What about the elements of “wildness” that erupted—was that Holy Spirit inspired too? What about that which they had always believed within their traditions, had they been totally wrong? Was the alienation of relationships that resulted God-willed as well?

In America’s sectarian heyday the mood of permissiveness offered options of all kinds: perfectionism and sanctification, millennialist announcements about approaching end-times, newly received “God-revelations,” and the espousal of universalism—God would ultimately save all people. These, and other ideas, also influenced Mennonites in America and resulted in a sizable number of spin-off groups. There is evidence that the “American Mennonites” tended to be more schism-prone than the immigrant Men-

nonites from Russia in the nineteenth century. John F. Funk's *The Mennonite Church and Her Accusers* (1878) bears evidence of this, as do the articles and pamphlets printed by the Mennonites in this era. The Mennonite Brethren were also affected by these movements—particularly millennialist teachings as propounded by the Seventh Day Adventists. There were numerous defections. Perhaps the tensions of the crude pioneer setting and the alienation felt from fellow Mennonites, along with other factors, provided some push for them in this direction as they looked for God's promised end to the time of suffering and a new beginning for the children of God.

Mennonite Brethren and Baptists

Since Baptists had associated helpfully with the emerging Mennonite Brethren in Russia, it should not surprise us to note that these relationships continued to be nurtured in America. This association seems to have been particularly distasteful to the main-line Mennonites. When Mennonite Brethren were dubbed "Baptists" by other Mennonites, it was far from a compliment—it represented a forsaking of the true Mennonite faith.

Eight months after their secession in Russia, the newly-formed Mennonite Brethren group declared that they would now be baptized as believers since their previous, so-called baptism had only been a meaningless ritual performed in their former church association. It had not represented an actual, personal and living faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Not only was this "re-baptism" regarded by the *Kirchliche* as a detestable, tradition-denying experience, but the newly chosen mode was equally unsavory—immersion!

In the years that followed, Mennonite Brethren in Russia gained additional assistance from Baptists in their re-study of the faith by carefully reviewing both Baptist and Mennonite confessions of faith. They also enjoyed significant and influential relationships with some Baptist

leaders. Ultimately the Mennonite Brethren statement of faith came out more "Mennonite" than it did "Baptist," though there was a period of time in some locales where it seemed the Baptist influence might swallow Mennonite distinctives. Also, for Mennonite Brethren, the newly felt push to be aggressive in evangelizing and missionary endeavors was made possible initially through Baptist mission organizations.

In North America contacts with Baptists continued. Some Mennonite Brethren leaders were educated at the Colgate-Rochester Baptist Seminary in New York. German-speaking Walter Rauschenbush beyond being an influential teacher at the seminary was an appreciated if occasional speaker at Mennonite Brethren gatherings in Kansas. Some of the first North American Mennonite Brethren missionaries in both Africa and India served under Baptists. The York County, Nebraska, Mennonite Brethren church school is listed, in an 1888 atlas, as "Menonite [sic] Baptist German School."

There were other influences besides those of Baptists. The York/Hamilton County Mennonite Brethren Church in Nebraska repeatedly invited some holiness preachers from Fort Wayne, Indiana, to preach in the early decades of the 20th century. It was not long before Mennonite Brethren students attended Chicago's Moody Bible Institute and the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Gradually a large number of main-line American evangelical movements, denominations, and personalities played influential roles in shaping some theological emphases and in providing some models for the life and expression of the church in America. Some of these imports were long lasting, others were short-lived. How beneficial and significant the influences were for Mennonite Brethren beliefs, practices, and emphases is still in question. Some of these inroads were certainly incompatible with Anabaptist roots.

Conflicting Educational Goals and Methods

The necessity to educate their youth was soon evident

and became a major undertaking for Mennonite immigrants. Education in the new setting had to deal with the transition from European-type authoritarianism to America's emphasis on individualism and democracy. At first there was insistence that the teaching be predominantly in German and that the subject matter be religious studies. The German language, religious studies, and church gatherings were almost inseparably linked for some time, while other pursuits and studies shifted over to English.

This separation in the concept of education led to a conflict about educational goals and priorities. It came to be German language, classic literature, and Bible school education versus English and liberal arts content—a conflict which Tabor, Pacific, and the Mennonite Brethren Bible College felt with some intensity at different stages.

Some other issues that schooling brought to the fore were such things as parties, public boy-girl friendships, competing in sports events, staging plays, and debating. Was it really necessary for Mennonite Brethren schools to emulate other American schools? The more conservative older leaders and parents saw their youth slipping away from them. Would the second generation lose all that the immigrant generation had come to America to safeguard? Would the age-old pattern of "holding" the next generation really not work in America? The rapidity of change from many generations of cultural isolation to Americanization was difficult to accommodate.

Those who stayed in Russia were generally more progressive and not nearly as hesitant as the emigrants to America to make educational and cultural changes. When the *Russländer* immigrants came to Canada a half century later and settled alongside of the *Kanadier* (19th century immigrants), the *Russländer* seemed to be considerably more progressive than the *Kanadier*. The conflicts embodied in being "in the world but not of the world" made difficult the adjustment between these two segments.

A New Agenda

The American situation introduced a new agenda for Mennonite Brethren which, in many respects, was considerably different from that faced in the Russian setting. How should one relate to the native American Indians, slavery, tobacco, alcoholic beverages in a prohibitionist milieu, the use of guns for hunting, land speculation, friendly American neighbors, other denominations, itinerant revivalists, the presence and honor given to the flag in public schools, and the availability of education in good, government-sponsored schools? What about voting? They soon learned that all citizens were, in fact, a part of the decision-making process—either by voicing their opinions or by refusing to do so. Democracy, they learned, was government determined by the majority of the people themselves, not superimposed dictatorial, authoritarian leadership as they had seen it heretofore. Voting also included dimensions such as the free press, the rights of women and minorities, freedom to campaign—all of which was a kind of permissiveness not known to them and their forebears. Indeed, the segregated, (ghettoized) Mennonite village or colony was a thing of the past. America was a democracy, and Mennonites, though frustrated by all that meant, were captivated by it. The most frustrated, however, were the leaders who saw how quickly their direction-giving was no longer highly respected, nor, frankly, as meaningful and insightful.

The acceptance and friendliness that fellow Americans had for these German-speaking immigrants from Russia ran hot and cold. The de-Germanization process in both language use and cultural styles was a relatively slow one. German and “peculiar Mennonite culture patterns” were an integral part of their church and community life. It was a kind of cliquishness similar to many other ethnic groups that gave whole-hearted acceptance only to “their own kind.” During both World Wars the Mennonites, not without cause, were regarded with some suspicion.

Leadership and Growth

The small, scattered, leaderless Mennonite Brethren nucleus that came to the U.S.A. beginning in 1874-1875 appears not to have had a cohesiveness until "officially ordained Mennonite Brethren ministers" arrived after 1879—specifically Elders Abraham Schellenberg and Johann J. Regier. For the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren this was not so. They arrived in the summer of 1874 with their trusted leader, Elder Jacob A. Wiebe. The Mennonite Brethren groups received some leadership from lay people, but this was not generally regarded as authentic since these had not been officially ordained in Russia. An illustration of this is Peter Regier's role in the Hamilton/York County, Nebraska, congregation where his qualifications to lead were questioned. In 1878, when he called for and convened the "first Mennonite Brethren Conference," the conference was declared invalid because (1) recognized, authoritative leadership was not present and (2) the representation of Mennonite Brethren members was not adequate from several geographical areas. With the 1879 arrival of Elders Schellenberg and Regier, one notes an "official, recognized" beginning of the Mennonite Brethren in North America.

There was phenomenal growth in membership in the first decade after their arrival, not only because of immigrating Russian Mennonite Brethren, but more particularly through conversions and a joining of their ranks from out of the main-line Mennonite immigrant group. At the Hamilton/York County congregation, for example, more than 150 were baptized within ten years. Obviously this was interpreted as "sheep stealing" and contributed to inter-Mennonite tensions in small, closely knit communities where families and close friends were broken by such choices. The 34 members that constituted the 1882 charter membership of the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church were all from the French Creek Johannestal, main-line Mennonite group.

The first generation in America inherited the *Stillen im Lande* ideal as well as a theoretically espoused insistence upon being "missionary." They were being pulled in the opposite directions of isolationism and evangelism. In the early conference records one senses that reference to "mission work" in which Mennonite Brethren were active refers primarily to the "ripe fields" among the main-line Mennonite immigrants and the nominally Lutheran and Reformed German-speaking Volga immigrants from Russia. Any sizable number of converts was always from these two categories in those early years. It was not until many decades later that Mennonite Brethren were able to make inroads to people of non-Mennonite or non-German background, though they preached and felt the necessity of being missionary and evangelistic. They seemed to be able to do this more comfortably with people at a radical geographical or racial distance from them—in Africa, India, or among the Commanche Indians in the Oklahoma Territory. The difficulty of being missionary and evangelizing was the source of considerable frustration for many. In their frustration a number left the ranks of Mennonite Brethren to become Baptists, to affiliate with the more sect-like community Bible churches, or to become involved in the faith-mission type of outreach that did not battle with the cultural baggage of the German-speaking and isolated Mennonite Brethren.

Are Mennonite Brethren "Church"?

One of the most important concepts theoretically emphasized by Mennonites since their Anabaptist beginnings was "church." The 1860 event in Russia was largely an attempt at the restoration of that reality. What have Mennonite Brethren become after a century in North America—115 years after the attempted restoration in Russia? Some descriptive, though obviously partial and inadequate expressions, give evidence of transformations: Americanized, organized, publicized, compromised, theologized,

de-Germanized, liberalized, individualized, democratized, evangelicalized, de-centralized, ecumenized, socialized, and urbanized.

Most of us admit that, though there are some very fine aspirations in our emphases, we are not what we say we are. We are often still very much enamored by the *Stillen im Lande* ideal. Is that stance a God-call or, as Leland Harder has described it, an "accident of history?" Were our much spoken of Anabaptist forebears not driven into isolation because they were anything but quiet about their commitment and life-style. Is it not important for us to see our God-call as being where people are and where the Gospel is needed? Are not Jesus, Paul, the disciples and the early church our best models in this as well? *Die Stillen im Lande* hardly describes them. Even our attempts at urbanizing are often only huddles of "Tabor alumni," "folks from my own home town," or "our kind of people," instead of being the "family of God," eager to witness, love, invite, and embrace the world's homeless into that Family.

Instead of giving priority to being "church," the Mennonite Brethren apparently were overly eager to be accepted and appreciated in America's mainstream citizenry and Christendom. Psychologically that desire can easily be understood from out of a history of rejection as the progeny of the "hated Anabaptist heresy" for four centuries. We appear to have become enamored by bigness, success, affluence. The attainment of these goals brought with it some serious consequences in terms of being faithful to Christ. There is much anonymity among us. We do not generally care and love one another honestly, deeply, responsibly.

We sit in polished pews and have professional leaders, carefully defined constitutions, well-practiced music-making, literature galore, large offerings, many conference mission and service programs, and the committee involvement of many from among us. Is that necessarily Church? Do we really have a priesthood of all believers, Good News

(Gospel) for the despairing and enslaved, Jesus-like compassion for the hurting in today's world?

A high priority "call" for Mennonite Brethren was to be the people of God—and that meant being the Church—Christ's Body still at work. He came to seek and to save that which was lost. We have been on the move geographically. Has our moving been motivated by personal pushes for further wealth-gathering, for prestige, for enjoying easier situations? Or has it been motivated by our deep drive to be Christ's Body, being at places where He is needed.

Clarifying Issues

The pressures to clarify issues have increased primarily for two reasons. We have moved much more boldly into "the world" from out of our history of isolation, and the volume of issues to be confronted has increased in the more complex society of 20th century America. For the first half of this century the predominant resolutions and directives of conferences, local congregations, and leaders were relevant for a provincial Mennonite Brethren, still largely with an isolationistic mind-set. The answers to issues raised in the first half of this century were generally crisp, concise, and simple. They appear to have been settled by trusted leaders whose proposals were fairly quickly agreed upon by the predominantly male, older decision-making bodies gathered for such purposes. These directives tended to be confirmations of concepts already espoused in Russia. Gradually, however, the situations became increasingly complex and the issues demanding answers more urgent. Old, previously raised issues were often re-opened for further clarification than the previous answers had supplied. The newer issues have usually been of a more universal nature than previously. Furthermore, the process of question-answering has no longer been satisfied with an authoritarian proposal made by one of the trusted leaders. There has been a tendency to handle mat-

ters more democratically, more thoroughly, and, fortunately, in many instances more Biblically than traditionally. Usually the end-result has been an answer less crisp, concise or simple than formerly. With the consideration of more variables in both the issues and in ways in interpreting the Bible, there has come a wider diversity of opinions and therefore less clear directives.

Often we have been forced into formulating directives by situations such as war, depression, affluence, frontier life, business associations, labor unions, marriage, divorce, etc. The new American setting and the developing world-awareness has fortunately forced us to study the Bible, Jesus, and the concept of the Church, and to clarify many priorities which have heretofore been overlooked in favor of tradition or common usage. This has not usually been a comfortable process, but it has been enlightening and rewarding, bringing with it some renewal and much needed re-thinking about being the people of God in our world.

Many Inter-Relationships

Mennonite Brethren, through the years, found themselves in an increasing number of relationships with other Christians. Early relationships were largely only with fellow immigrant Mennonites and some Baptists. Slowly associations developed with evangelicals, pietists, and the "American Mennonites". There were further contacts with individuals from millennialists, universalists, revivalists, prohibitionists, and other movements. Some of these movements evolved into camps, and finally agencies that represented these views: the National Council of Churches, the National Association of Evangelicals, the International Council of Christian Churches, etc. In addition there were fellowship, evangelizing, and service agencies—Christian Business Men's Committee, Youth for Christ, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Billy Graham Association, Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service. Beyond this there were communi-

ty groups brought into existence to nurture individuals in prayer, Bible study, service functions, evangelizing, or discipling. At times, these extra-church activities tended to become the most vital and exciting arenas of personal participation. This would leave the local churches with the more traditional routines and rituals of providing the regular worship services, Sunday School, choirs, youth programs, baptisms, marriages, and burials. Because the greater vitality was often felt on the non-congregational levels, the local churches' routine programs tended to be regarded of least significance.

Furthermore, the availability of insurance, medical help, police force, etc. has also tended to make us feel less dependent on God or one another. The prayers of Mennonite Brethren today do not have the "life and death" urgency which the *Sitz im Leben* a century ago forced upon them. Perhaps we haven't yet felt the urgency of being rescued from even deeper and more devastating demonic forces in our *Sitz im Leben* today.

Mennonite Brethren — from Sect to Denomination

H. Richard Niebuhr's *Social Sources of Denominationalism* carefully distinguishes between sect and church and points up the tendency of sect to become church after the initial flashpoint passes. The socialization of the next generation then gets under way. Mennonite Brethren history fits Niebuhr's description. We have socialized our youth so well that the choice of membership other than Mennonite Brethren is looked upon with askance. In this century, we have also adjusted so well to the American way of life and to main-stream evangelical Christianity that it has become increasingly difficult to explain the uniqueness of Mennonite Brethren. Radicalism in commitment and ethical responses to world and church wrongs are lacking. Often the "cause of America" is seen as synonymous with our own life goals. Fear of being odd is more threatening than fear of not being Christ-like. It may well be that

course correction for the Body of Christ will erupt again among us, bringing a sect into existence that traditionalists will combat as heresy. What is lacking in Mennonite Brethren uniqueness is not a theoretical stance, but faithfulness to that orientation.

Where Are We? Where Should We Be?

In 1960 we declared that the Mennonite Brethren had experienced a century of grace and witness. God had indeed led us. But is that all that is to be said? As we raise our "hallelujahs" for the many good things that have happened, we also see warning signs on the horizon that show serious discrepancies between what we say we want to be and what we are.

Where are we in this pilgrimage? (1) Some see us as having arrived at a level of stabilization. These assert that we are now at the best stage of our history. (2) Some contend that the Golden Years of our existence were in the era when authorities spoke, were heard, and followed. (3) Some would announce that the Mennonite Brethren Church is, in fact, finished. There are new, more vital streams of God-at-work where we can and should go. (4) Others declare that we have, indeed, accommodated too much to the world-order, but we are not beyond the possibility of repentance. (5) Some voices around us are also saying that the evangelical kind of Anabaptism advocated by Mennonite Brethren has come of age precisely in these times. What we have theoretically espoused is appropriate for precisely this moment. It seems that while some Mennonite Brethren have given up feeling a rightness about our aspirations, others are becoming very much what we have wanted to be. We have come to a challenging and interesting time in history. Perhaps others will "out-Mennonite Brethren" us in their goals and aspirations. It is Christ-faithfulness that is important, not Mennonite Brethren theory or tradition. "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ," (I Cor. 3:11).

MENNONITE BRETHREN IDENTITY AND THEOLOGICAL ADVERSITY

J. B. Toews

John A. Toews in *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* traces some of the influences which have shaped the theology of the Mennonite Brethren in our 115 year history. Under the title "Understanding Biblical Revelation: Developments and Distinctions in Mennonite Brethren Theology" the author outlines the historical roots, distinctions, and external influences of M.B. theology. The purpose of this essay is to broaden the consideration of these external influences. Both their origin and their affect upon the theology and life of the church need enlarged attention. The source materials for considering the subject are a mixture of historical documents and personal experiences. The latter gives portions of the essay a biographical style.

Mennonitism in Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries had become a socio-religious culture which no longer expressed the relationship of faith and life unique to their forefathers of the 16th century. The *Kleine Gemeinde* and the fellowship centers in Orloff and Gnadenfeld testified to broad concern for a return to the expressions of faith recorded in the writings of Menno and the early Anabaptists.¹ The cry for faith and life consistent with the scriptures was a dominant emphasis in the founding of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship. It is reflected in the statement of secession and other confessional documents.²

This scriptocentric position of the Mennonite Brethren has been a directive for their pilgrimage of faith and life in Russia and in North America. A statement in the *Mennonitische Blätter* of 1863 suggests the Mennonite Brethren fellowship's relation to the scriptures: "They are better versed in the Holy Scriptures, so much so that one is amazed and pleased at the understanding of scriptures of the lowest and most humble among them."³

Wesley Prieb writes: "The early members of our church were often recognized by their bulging coat pockets which contained a well worn Bible. The Bible Hour (*Bibelstunden*) became the basis of their fellowship and worship. Reading the Word was part of their daily family habits."⁴ The centrality of the Bible in the movement may help explain why a small revivalistic movement within the larger Mennonite community remained anchored in the 16th century Anabaptist roots, even though subjected to many theological influences throughout their history.

The influences that have affected Mennonite Brethren thought are numerous. The anchor amidst these divergent currents has been this scriptural anabaptism. The question of "What does the Bible say" permitted a people to navigate in turbulent seas. An examination of the major influences that have affected Mennonite Brethren theology adds cumulative evidence that their commitment to the scriptures was the guiding influence during the historic pilgrimage.

Influence of Pietism

With its roots in Anabaptism the Mennonite Brethren early came under the influences of pietism. Their insistence on the experiential reality of personal salvation through repentance, faith, and the new birth made them natural allies with pietism. Pietism, as modulated through the preaching ministry of Eduard Wuest among the colonists, was present during the 1845-1860 search for new life. The convergence of Anabaptism and Pietism did not necessarily pull the renewal movement in different directions. Robert Friedman has noted many points of commonality in the two traditions.

Both groups justified their policy on the basis of the leadership of the Holy Spirit which taught them the correct understanding of the scriptures. Both claimed to live strictly according to the Bible, that is neither had confidence in a Christianity of theologians and

scholars. Both were seriously concerned with the Christian reality which lies beyond church and worship although they understand the ultimate nature of this Christian reality differently. After all, how could it be determined who possesses the right Holy Spirit except through the evidences of the same life.⁵

Pietistic writings were frequently part of Mennonite Brethren libraries in Russia. The book *Wahres Christentum* by Johann Arnd was especially prominent. My father referred frequently to Arnd and read portions from this book to us during family devotions.

A strong pietistic influence on the Mennonite Brethren fellowship continued up to the first World War. Jacob Kroeker, one of the few theologically trained Bible teachers, was closely affiliated with the Blankenburg Alliance Conference and provided Mennonite linkage with the Alliance movement in Western Europe.

The Blankenburg Alliance Conference was established in 1885 and became the center for the European movement of the Plymouth Brethren. Dr. F. W. Baedeker was the major architect of Blankenburg. He was a member of the Plymouth Brethren, also called Darbyites, who originated around 1830 in Plymouth, England, and Dublin, Ireland. The "Brethren" professed to have no creeds for fear of honoring human opinions too highly, yet the writings of Darby and other leaders were dogmatic.

Their emphases were strong on the inner spiritual life, sanctification, fellowship, and prophecy.⁶ Neither Dr. Baedeker nor the majority of the speakers at the conferences through the years were theologians. The need for serious efforts in systematic theological studies was not part of F. W. Baedeker. He was a charismatic personality, a man rich in spiritual experiences, and a gifted pastor. As a witness for Jesus Christ he gave his life unreservedly to the ministry and spent much of his time in serving the Russian prison population. This ministry took him throughout Russia and into the most removed Siberian labor camps. His example of deep devotion and prayer, unselfish

self-sacrifice in service, and untiring work in teaching the scriptures with the central emphasis on the truth, "God loves you," carried an impact and took the place of any effort at theological dialogue.⁷ Dr. Baedeker was frequently quoted by my late father and his colleagues in the ministry.

Other men at the Blankenburg Conferences who worked closely with Baedeker were General von Viebahn, Otto Stockmayer, F. B. Meyers, Ernst Bebbardt, and Professor Stroeter. Erich Beyreuther notes that the collective teaching at Blankenburg was one-sided and not always with healthy or generally recognized hermeneutical principles.⁸

Baedeker served frequently in prolonged Bible Conferences sponsored by some of the wealthy land owners of the Mennonite communities (Steinbach, Apantlee and Vorwerk Juschanlee). In the pietistic movement he was generally recognized as an authority in the exposition of the scriptures. Professor Stroeter was probably the second most influential person from the Blankenburg circle. He held repeated Bible studies of one or two week duration for the teachers and ministers. His ministry ceased when he became a Universalist. The writings of other Blankenburg people such as Viebahn, Meyers, and Stockmayer were widely read and served as a major resource for the ministry of the Mennonite Brethren. My father's library featured all these publications and became a major source for my theological reading while a college student. According to the late Henry Cornelsen, Coaldale, Alberta, these publications were the main resources for the ministers of the tradition.⁹

The position of Jacob Reimer, as a member of the Board of Directors of Blankenburg, permitted leaders of Mennonite Brethren fellowships to attend the Blankenburg conferences on a regular basis. Reimer, highly recognized as a Bible teacher, is especially mentioned as a frequent attendant at the Conferences.¹⁰

The influences of this close contact with the pietistic movements in England and the Continent were not without far reaching effects upon the life and development of the

Mennonite Brethren fellowship. It added strength to the position in the 1902 Confession of Faith which recognized all true born again believers irrespective of organizational and confessional affiliation as brethren and sisters in Christ.¹¹ This strong inter-confessional position within the brotherhood resulted in serious tensions. The closed cultural structure of the Mennonite community in Russia bred an isolationism which was threatened by the closer spiritual fellowship with believers from other confessions. J. W. Reimer, called the pioneer in the cause of the Alliance movements among the Mennonite Brethren, offered untiring leadership in example and precept in his relationship to believers of other groups. In his teaching ministry he also expressed the oneness of all true believers. The forming of the Alliance Mennonite Brethren fellowship in Lichtfelde, Molatschna (1905), later called the *Lichtfelder Gemeinde*, must be accepted as a direct result of the influence of Blankenburg. This influence, even though strongly resisted by the majority of Mennonite Brethren, paved the way for a more conciliatory relationship between fellow believers in the Mennonite world.

The struggle on the issue of the open and closed communion, which has been difficult and long in our history, was influenced by Blankenburg. J. W. Reimer in his untiring effort to widen the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren by accepting believers not baptized by immersion even faced the possibility of excommunication. Because of his stance, an excommunication resolution was introduced at the 1902 Ruekenau conference. It is reported that Reimer's love and warmth expressed in his testimony that even severance would not diminish his concern for them stayed the resolution.¹²

The resolution, passed at the Winnipeg Conference in 1963 to receive non-immersed believers into the membership of the church, thus has a long history dating back to the contact of the Mennonite Brethren with the Blankenburg Conference and the pietistic movements of Western

Europe between 1890 and 1914.¹³

This belief in the oneness of all believers and consequent openness to other fellowships was enlarged by the periodical *Das Allianz Blatt*. Published in Germany during the first quarter of the century it circulated widely in Mennonite Brethren homes.

The system of Darbystic scriptural interpretation with its tightly structured eschatology also came to the Mennonite Brethren through Blankenburg. J. W. Reimer, the prophetic voice in eschatology both in Russia and Canada, developed his basic system of interpretation through his contacts with the Darbystic movement.

Pietism, with its emphasis on personal salvation, the fellowship of all true believers, and eschatology, remained rooted in the state church in Germany and the Confessional church in England. The concept of discipleship with its relational dimension to lifestyle and the principle of love for all men remained peripheral for them, in spite of an emphasis on sanctification. National patriotism and unconditional obedience to the state were part of their basic theological orientation. The German pietists are said to have followed the slogan, "When it comes to war then we shoot."¹⁴ Their loyalty to the Kaiser and country took precedent over that of Christ. Jacob Reimer and Jacob Friesen (who received his theological training in Germany) became important advocates of armed self-defense (the *Selbstschutz*) in 1918-1922. The crucial meeting at Ruekenau (1917) which led to the departure of the Russian Mennonites from their historic position of non-participation in war must be recognized as one of the impacts of pietism on basic Mennonite theology and ethics. It is the judgment of the late B. B. Janz that the Mennonites in Russia would not have departed from their historic peace position would it not have been for the leadership of Mennonite Brethren influenced by the Alliance movement of Europe.¹⁵

Historic honesty demands that we also observe the

strong support for military self-defense which came from other quarters. Some of the wealthy landowners who in the pre-revolution era sponsored the earlier mentioned Bible Conferences now supported the Selbstschutz. The German culture and educational programs of the Russian Mennonites offered them a broad sphere of influence with the German occupation army in the Ukraine, 1917-1920. It also encouraged military collaboration. The absence of any legal government following the Russian revolution and the roaming hordes of lawless marauders who murdered, plundered, and destroyed at will offered circumstantial pressures for theological compromise.

The theological openness of the Alliance movement became the occasion for other tensions within the brotherhood. The legalistic trend in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship in the area of ethics, the "Do's and Don'ts," were partially reactions to the greater ethical freedom advocated by the pietistic oriented Alliance movement.¹⁶ According to B. B. Janz and A. H. Unruh, the pietistic freedom for personal and individual interpretation of scripture in contrast to the Anabaptist understanding of corporate discernment of scripture also caused confusion. Janz summarizes the positive and negative effects of the pietistic influence:

In conclusion we cast an overview on the character of the position of faith of the M.B. Church in the latter years under the leading influence of the 'Free Brethren' (freien Brüder) when the formerly much rebuked conservative narrowness (Engherzigkeit) had been stripped. Normally there should have been basic growth according to the word of 2 Tess. 1:3: 'We ought always to give thanks to God for you brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged and the love of each one of you all towards one another grows ever greater.' Through the deeper exposition of scripture, literature for devotional nurture and theology, ministers from abroad, Professors, Doctors, Theologians from the Baltic provinces, Germany, England who served with sermons

and frequently with Bible courses of a week duration to larger groups of teachers and ministers with free provisions of lodging and meals supplied by the wealthy brethren in Steinbach and Apanlee, there came much light from above. However, when Professor Stroeter's emphasis on redemptive universalism was noted it came to a sudden halt under the leadership of Peter Unruh. Thus there had come much light and new scriptural understanding The pulpit ministry had become more effective. The inner warmth, however, with the concern for the lost was waning. There was much criticism. Life and walk had weakened. The struggles within the Conference had affected the unity which hovered like a mildew over the brotherhood especially the leading brethren. In doctrine there were uncertainties. Not considering the exposition concerning the participation at the Lord's Table, there was the teaching concerning the distinction between the Kingdom and the Church, where some parts of the New Testament found no application for us, they applied only to the future of Israel and that quite inclusive. To have an Elder, is not scriptural for the church, there must be several Elders As proof for the justification of bearing arms, however, the example of Abraham, the father of faith, also for the New Testament, in his expedition with 318 servants to conquer the heathen in order to save Lot, was applicable That corresponds with the quotation from Brother Unruh of a much criticized word from the old brethren: 'It is thus written' instead of saying: 'This is how I understood what is written.' While the Reformers, including Daechsels Bibelwerk and other works of exposition did not follow a double meaning in expounding the Word, this mastering of the scripture has caused much and serious confusion for earnest brethren, also for me. For a time it weakened my conscience; whether you believe or do so or otherwise, does not matter so much because it can be interpreted both ways. How far can we go in a dual interpretation of the Word?¹⁷

The struggles brought by the influence of pietism are well reflected in this testimony of a veteran leader.

Influence of the Baptists

The relationship of the Mennonite Brethren with the Baptists has been substantial. The years following 1860 record strong Baptist relationships which influenced the formation of early church polity.¹⁸ This contact may also have provided a point of reference for the early brethren when they faced questions regarding the form of baptism.¹⁹

The continued fraternal relationship between the Mennonite Brethren and the Baptists was nurtured most through the early cooperative missionary program with the American Baptist Missionary Union. During the years from 1889 through 1914 seventeen missionaries from the Mennonite Brethren churches in Russia served in India under the cooperative arrangement with the Union.²⁰ The beginning of the foreign missions movement in North America also received directives through this relationship.²¹ The methods and policies for missionary work which governed Mennonite Brethren missions in the first sixty years of its development were patterned after the example of the Baptist programs.

The early missionaries of the Mennonite Brethren, with few exceptions, were trained in Baptist schools—Hamburg Theological Seminary for the missionaries from Russia, Rochester Seminary for the Americans. It is logical to assume that our theology of missions, mission strategy, and methods of church planting were largely an adoption from the Baptists without an independent study of the scriptures to determine the New Testament pattern of missions.

Accepting the Baptist influence in the development of our missions concepts and principles led to basic tensions between our professed church concept and the pattern of missionary churches developed abroad. The major disparity existed in the positional function of the missionary in a ministry to and for a people instead of a brotherhood relationship which allows no room for positional rankings but expresses the New Testament ministry as being with a

people. The nurture of missionary vision and responsibility through the fellowship with the Baptists, however, was a very positive result of their influence. To this must be added their contributions to the life of the Mennonite Brethren in evangelism, Christian education, and theology. Our resources and inspiration in these areas over a period of years came largely from Baptist sources.

The cultural and economic form of the Mennonite community for the first 75 years of our history provided favorable circumstances for a lay teaching ministry in the church. The concern to discover the gifts within the church was part of the New Testament understanding of congregational life. The strong instructional program from the traveling Bible teachers (*Reiseprediger*) equipped the laity for this task. The change of our cultural patterns through increasing industrial mechanization and educational advance in America moved the Mennonite Brethren into closer relationships with the Baptists. The early Bible teachers at Tabor College, H. W. Lohrenz and H. F. Toews, were trained in Baptist institutions in Louisville, Kentucky, and Rochester, New York. The programs in our own schools provided very limited or no emphasis in Anabaptist theology.

There was an absence of any literature on our scriptural understanding of the church for the first 75 years of our history in North America. With the arising need for a paid ministry to meet the changing occupational and cultural pattern there also came the need for further theological training. With few exceptions, those who sought this preparation beyond our own schools attended Baptist Seminaries. The years from 1930 to 1955 register a strong movement to Baptist schools.²²

Those returning tended to introduce Baptist church polity. The positional role of the pastorate and the hierarchical organizational patterns came through these brethren. The organizational model of multiple church leadership—the New Testament concept of the elders—was

rapidly replaced by a central function for the pastor and the church council as a representative body of the functional departments of the church programs—board of trustees, christian education, deaconry, music department, etc.

The change in the governing structure of the church resulted in a misplacement of the New Testament emphasis that the gifts of the ministry are given for the purpose of "equipping the saints for the work of the ministry." The local church withdrew from the responsibility of selecting from their midst brethren who had the gifts of teaching and preaching. Young men responding to the call of God to enter the gospel ministry seldom received encouragement or confirming support. The schools became the recruiting agency for church leadership. The church for the past three decades (less in Canada) hired their leadership as professionally trained workers. The gradual change in many churches from the principle of plurality in the spiritual leadership to the practice of departmental representation in the government of the church also brought major changes in the decision making process of the brotherhood. The exercise of the believer's community in seeking guidance through a process of discernment was replaced in many congregations by democratic processes.

The effects of these changes on the basic concept of the church found expression in the emphasis on the independence of the local congregation and resulted in the change of the official name of the brotherhood from "The Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church" to "The Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches."^{2 3} The brotherhood conceptually, organizationally, and functionally, thus moved toward accommodation to patterns of American Protestantism. The Mennonite Brethren Churches gradually identified with the popular trends of mainstream American evangelicalism. This process of change, however, cannot be ascribed only to Baptist influence, but was part of a larger pattern of association.

Influence of Bible Institutes and the Bible School Movement

The Bible Hour (*Biblestunde*) of Mennonite Brethren life in Russia was basic for their spiritual nurture and development. The life-line of the movement, as suggested earlier, was their fellowship over an open Bible. The scattered farm life of North America which replaced more intimate village settings made these house meetings more difficult. The Bible School movement may have developed as the American alternative for the Bibelstunden as practiced in Russia.²⁴ It was a new way to provide spiritual nurture to the youth of the churches and generate the motivation for missionary service. The teachers of the Bible schools traveled through the churches in the fashion of the former *Reiserprediger*. The Bible Institute/School movement while fulfilling an old function brought new thrusts to the church. We examine the influence of both non-Mennonite and Mennonite schools.

The Bible Institutes—Biola in Los Angeles, Moody in Chicago, and Northwestern in Minneapolis—had major influences on the spiritual development of the brotherhood. Biola attracted many of our young people and contributed to the development of church leadership. C. N. Hiebert, evangelist; G. B. Hubert, Reedley; J. D. Hofer, Fresno; Nick Jantz, Herbert; A. A. Kroeker, Winkler; H. K. Warrentin, Fresno; and others received much of their scriptural understanding and leadership training at Biola under the influence of R. A. Torrey. The mark of Biola upon these men was a strong emphasis on the experiential reality of Christ as Savior and Lord with a central emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Several of them, including G. B. Hubert and J. D. Hofer, emphasized the filling of the Holy Spirit as a second act of grace. A. A. Kroeker became a pioneer in Christian education at the Winkler Bible Institute and in the Canadian conference. Nick Jantz was an evangelist and Bible school teacher for many years. The missionary fervor which characterized the latter years of H. K.

Warkentin's life was an expression of the inspiration received at Biola. Aaron Friesen, founder of the M.B. mission in Los Angeles, was also a graduate of Biola.²⁵

The writings of R. A. Torrey provided spiritual guidance for the life of the brotherhood. His book *What the Bible Teaches* was the guide for doctrinal studies during several decades. He conducted frequent Bible Conferences in our churches and for several years was the speaker at the Annual Tabor College Bible Conference.

Moody Bible Institute was the training base for several of our early missionaries. A. A. Janzen, pioneer of the African Mennonite Brethren church, was one of the early ones to attend. The devotional books of D. L. Moody served as a major source of preaching material for lay ministers in many churches. The Moody Culpportage Library books were, for many years, part of the devotional reading of our constituency. The book *Synthetic Bible Studies* by James M. Gray, the successor to Moody as president of the institute, served as a basic text in our own bible institutes during the 1940's.

Northwestern Bible Institute, under the strong leadership of W. B. Riley, had a phenomenal influence upon the Mennonite Brethren. The number of students from M.B. churches constituted a large percentage of the student body for several years. J. J. Wiebe for many years pastor in Corn, Oklahoma and member of the Board of Foreign Missions; Tina Pauls, missionary worker in Minneapolis; Martha Janzen, veteran missionary in Africa; Rueben Baerg, David Wiens, and Leo Wiens, still in leadership within the brotherhood; and many other workers in local churches were Northwestern students. The writings of Norman D. Harrison, member of the Northwestern faculty, were a major part of Mennonite Brethren ministers libraries between the 1930's and 1950's. His expositions were devotional and instructive. (I personally had the full series of Harrison's writings.)

The spiritual resources which came to us through the

contributions of these schools have been tributaries that enlarged the original stream of Mennonite Brethren faith and life. The emphasis on biblical content, missionary motivation, and simplistic hermeneutics became sustaining factors in our spiritual pilgrimage.

The many benefits which came to us through the ministry of these schools at the same time submerged the consciousness of our historic identity. Our theology of discipleship was replaced by a strong emphasis on personal salvation in which conversion was nothing more than a private transaction between the individual and God. It became an accomplished dated event. For many people confirmation of salvation lies in giving the exact date and hour that marked acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior.

Evangelism, instead of being the expression of a relationship between God and man, moves as a rescue operation to assure people the benefit of a final destiny in Heaven. The relationship of the individual member within the church community as a criteria of a redeemed life was replaced by a personal experiential event. The provisions coming so easy were detached from a life of love, self-denial, and service within the believing community and a bleeding world.

By over-emphasizing the appropriation of the redemptive provision for personal salvation and the responsibility for missions and under-emphasizing discipleship and service, the Mennonite Brethren have been caught in the tensions of a contemporary polarity. We are pulled between an emphasis on individual salvation with its concern for the personal devotional life and the concern for the life of social service, social action, and social justice. The first pressure moved the Mennonite Brethren fellowship into a close relationship with fundamentalistic evangelicalism. Dietrich Bonhoefer in *The Cost of Discipleship* called the emphasis on salvation with little or no responsibility for the life style of discipleship a gospel of "cheap grace."^{2 6}

The World Fundamentals Association, allied with the

Bible Institute movement, and organized in 1919 under the leadership of W. B. Riley, Harry Rimer, Arnold Gaebelin and others, brought to evangelical Protestantism a strong concern for propositional truths defending the inerrancy of the Bible, the literal interpretation of creation, the virgin birth of Jesus, the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, the substitutionary theory of atonement, and the imminent return of Christ. The public debates in the 1930's sponsored by the World Fundamentals Association gained a good hearing among Mennonite Brethren. The periodicals, *The Sword of the Lord* by John R. Rice, and the *Defender* by Gerald Winrod, became household literature among us. Both identified with the strong emphasis on propositional truth and creedal doctrine and overlooked the relational character of New Testament discipleship. The creedal emphasis on right doctrine and apologetical systems to prove the scripture, once foreign to our history, now became increasingly dominant in our pulpits and classrooms. Their centrality was achieved at the expense of an emphasis on Christ in the life and character of the Church.

The influences that came to the Mennonite Brethren from Biola, Moody, and Northwestern were extended in the 1920's and 1930's by Prairie Bible Institute, Three Hills, Alberta; and Carenport Bible Institute, Carenport, Saskatchewan. More recently the Bible Institute of Winnipeg has moved into a position of prominence and influence.

The emphasis on missions and evangelism in the Bible institutes had an awakening effect upon us, accounting for much of the upsurge of missionary vision and commitment during the 1930-1960 period. But the new evangelism contained a strong emphasis on child evangelism. The subsequent trend toward "child baptism" changed the character of a church built on the principles of repentance, conversion, adult baptism, and responsible discipleship in the context of a disciplined believer's church. The late B. B. Janz addressed the problem:

The longer the more it moved to child baptism even

though it is immersion, and the longer the more there are people without a true conversion experience the new life and discipline in the church becomes more difficult. The character of the M.B. Church, in spite of all light of scriptural understanding and all Christian and spiritual education, changes from a deeply pious and pure church to a solemn confessional people's church where Christian ethics becomes private judgement and is impotent for a renewal of life and walk, the hallmark of our fathers in the period of their spiritual health.²⁷

While the contributions of the Bible institutes, external to our brotherhood, nurtured our souls they also helped erode some basic commitments to a faith based on personal conversion, a holy life with consistent ethics, a responsible relationship to a redeemed community and a world in need. The focus of our spiritual identity was tested by the influences of these various schools.

The missionary calling of the church—an overarching concern in the historical record of the Mennonite Brethren movement—provided the major motivation for the building of our own Bible institutes, Christian academies (high schools), the Bible college and liberal arts colleges. The Bible school movement in North America dates back to 1884 when, under the leadership of J. F. Harms, a small short term Bible school was conducted in Canada, Kansas.²⁸ Many others soon followed.

In all such schools the emphasis on Biblical studies was an expression of the bibliocentric orientation of the Mennonite Brethren movement. The absence of formal theologically trained leadership within the brotherhood and the lack of written material to serve as a theological frame of reference left the Bible school movement dependent on literature from outside the radical reformation tradition.

The theological interpretation came from sources accessible to the pioneers of biblical studies. William Bestvater, who for many years offered dynamic leadership in the Bible schools, Bible conferences, and evangelism, drew from the resources of the C. I. Scofield correspondence

courses, A. C. Gaebelein, William Evans, H. C. Dixon, William Riley, and Harris Gregg.²⁹ The Canadian conference in 1920 invited Bestvater for a two month Bible course for ministers which extended his understandings of the scripture to the grass roots of the brotherhood.³⁰

The theological influences of this era are well reflected in the two textbooks written by Bestvater: *Textbüchlein in Glaubenslehre*, an organization of material gathered from Scofield, Evans, and Torrey; *Textbüchlein in Bibel-Kinde*, a compilation of materials from James Gray, Gaebelein, and Scofield.³¹

A series of articles by Bestvater in the *Zionsbote* in the 1920s under the heading, "Zeugniss der Schrift" (a witness of the scripture), were also an effective dissemination of the teachings gathered from the same sources.

The Bible school programs in the later 1920s and 1930s commonly used texts with similar interpretations. Frequently used were Theodor Haarbeck's, *Biblische Glaubenslehre*, *Der Dienst am Evangelium in Predigt und Seelsorge*, and *Das Christliche Leben nach der Schrift* for courses in Bible doctrine, pastoral theology, and Christian ethics. Giesbert Stochmann, *Ringet Recht*, a text on Christian ethics, was adopted in the 1930s and later.³²

The historic effort of the Mennonite Brethren to avoid creedal systems allowed for benefits to be drawn from the evangelical communities in America and Europe without becoming locked into a theological system of dogmatism. The absence of creedal systems among Bible school teachers retained flexibility and an openness to see truth in new relationships. The concluding statement of the 1902 Confession of Faith illumines this receptivity: "Every Confession of Faith, as every other teaching and exposition of scripture, is subject at all times to examination and estimation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit according to the Holy Scriptures. . .the only infallible written preserved resource of the necessary and sufficient revelation of God to humanity for our salvation."³³

The schools, our own as well as others, were a provision of God. The program of our schools, institutes, colleges, as well as the seminary in its earlier years, made little or no effort to provide in their curriculum systematic study of the historical and theological distinctives of the Mennonite Brethren. Our commitments to historic faith were generally viewed as rather incidental. The mission to proclaim a message to a needy world dominated the emphasis with good results. The balance of a biblical emphasis between "being, getting, and doing," however suffered.

Observations and Implications

The transition in our history from a brotherhood in a rigid cultural mold to a community influenced by broad theological and sociological exposure has enriched us spiritually and culturally. In the larger Mennonite community we have come more into our own in claiming the right to speak and to be heard. In the broad evangelical fellowship we gained recognition as a believer's community firm in biblical orientation and conservative in theological commitment. Within our own brotherhood there exists an uncertainty as to our specific theological identity in relation to the broader stream of evangelicalism, especially its fundamentalistic wing, as well as the larger Mennonite world.

The rapid cultural change from a rural agricultural people to an educational and professional people has left us unprepared to cope with a new generation that demands answers to the questions: Who are we? What makes us different from the mainstream of American evangelicalism? Are we justified in claiming a faith and mission different from those who are our brothers in Christ and citizens of the nation we have adopted as our home? Has the purpose of our history as a peculiar people been fulfilled?

The questions are about our faith and life. Has the absence of a concerted effort in our schools to give leader-

ship in identifying the foundation stones of our faith clouded our self-understanding? Have pietism and fundamentalistic evangelicalism left us with a gospel that doesn't impact our neighbors? Is the content of the gospel to accommodate the human quest to get, to have, to do, and be secure, or is it a call to follow Jesus and His call: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:34-35).

Our theological pilgrimage has left us with three particularly troublesome issues. Our congregations and schools are concerned with questions about the nature of scripture, the proper ecclesiology for the church, and the shape of the future.

The contemporary debate on the inerrancy of the Bible is historically foreign to our people. With our forebearers there was no need to debate the "how" as it relates to the process of revelation, inspiration, and the transmission of the written message of God to people in history. For them the major question was "who?" and "what?" the person and the message of the Bible. The character of the book in the unfolding of God's relationship to men in history throughout the Old Testament, the special revelation of God in redemption through Jesus Christ, the character and purpose of a redeemed community, and the certainty of the future in Christ's return was sufficient ground for their faith.

My father was possibly naive when he attended my classes in apologetics in 1934 where I put forth great efforts to prove the inspiration of the Bible. The proof text method of logical arguments borrowed from the World Fundamentalist Association served the young theologian as the structure of his teaching approach to the apparent problem. Father replied:

Son, is it necessary to defend the Bible? Would you find it necessary to defend a lion? Would not a lion

much better defend himself if he were turned loose? Is not the Bible itself proof enough to prove itself as the power of God to salvation? Is there any need to defend the Bible where the Bible is believed, lived, and taught? Is there any merit to prove the inerrancy of the Bible to people who do not believe it and do not know the witness of the spirit?

What should I say? Are we wrong to let the Bible stand on its own merit and through the witness of the spirit confirm it as God's word?

A. H. Unruh found this position of my father to be common to an earlier generation.

It is striking that our early brethren record no paragraph in their statement of faith in which they declare their position with respect to the scriptures even though they were in possession of the Confession of Faith prepared by Cornelius Ries in 1849 . . . in which the scriptures are declared as the only reliable infallible source of faith. Throughout their struggle for their convictions and answers to the attacks upon the young Mennonite Brethren Church we find with fathers of the movement an unchanging faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures. The Bible was for them the unfailing Word of God from cover to cover . . . In this commitment to the Word of God they reviewed every single truth and formed their concepts from the relationship to its content as they understood it.³⁴

Has our separation of truth and life, provision and responsibility, driven us to prove and defend the propositional foundation of our faith? Is the evidence of the gospel so lacking in our lives that it must be repositied in a document? Is not newness of life a stronger proof for the truth of the Bible than some creed which can be challenged?

The church as understood by the Mennonite Brethren is a fellowship in a relationship of love with Christ and with one another. It is a community of inter-responsibility and discipline. The gospel of grace as a gift to be appropriated without self denial and death is not part of our understanding of the Christian life. The contemporary emphasis of fundamentalistic evangelism—to offer free grace as the

doorway to a life of ease and security in this world and in the world to come—was not known among the early Mennonite Brethren. The church of an ecclesiastical democracy with room for individualistic independence in the local church and in the conference, well adapted from our American culture, would appear strange to our fathers and possibly even more so to the community of faith in the first centuries. Have external pressures led to a process of accommodation within? Have we become a comfortable church nurturing the hope of heaven without sharing the demands of the cross? Will we become a New Testament church by latching on to one of the many current models for church renewal? Can the church be the church without being in tension with the surrounding culture? Will not our theology of church come into focus only when we move beyond a popular easy grace to the New Testament concern for “following Jesus” (*Nachfolge*)?

The question of eschatology has a long history with the Mennonite Brethren. A. A. Unruh describes the eschatological view of the early Mennonite Brethren as follows: “They exhorted (each other) to watchfulness and to a holy walk. The present views with reference to the rapture and the millennium were apparently foreign to them. However, they joined in the prayer: ‘Amen, Come Lord Jesus.’ ”³⁵ The interest of the past several decades in eschatology is a phenomenon of the American Mennonite experience. Dispensational understandings of the end times came to us through the writings of Scofield and Gaebelien. They were significantly spread by the ministry of William Bestvater. For much of his life he carried eschatological expositions to our churches. As a son of a minister and Bible school teacher, I received frequent admonitions from my father to view particular interpretations of eschatology as possibilities but not accept them as dogma. A large segment of our brotherhood, particularly the younger theologians, shy away from the predictive certainties of American fundamentalistic eschatology.

There is no room for questioning the basic truths of eschatology. The return of Christ, his ultimate triumph, and the final judgement are beyond debate. The scriptures are clear that God is sovereign and history will find its consummation and purpose in his plan. But preoccupation with the "how, when and where" questions of eschatology can deflect us from the God-given historical task that is ours. Our task is not to fix the dates of the tribulation or the millennium or interpret the significance of every Israeli political event. Ours is to proclaim that the day of the Lord is coming.

The issues facing us in all three of these areas—hermeneutics, ecclesiology, eschatology—are vital and important and our responses will shape the theological identity of the church. Our response can either renew us and revitalize our mission from the biblical perspective, or they can erode the trust of history that God has given us as one part of his church.

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IV

MENNONITE BRETHREN IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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THE MEANING OF ANABAPTISM FOR THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

John E. Toews

In the last three years Mennonites in general and Mennonite Brethren in particular have recalled three formative events in the life of the Mennonite Church. Mennonites in the midwest three years ago celebrated the centennial of the coming of the Russian Mennonites to Kansas on August 16, 1974. In 1975 we commemorated the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Anabaptist movement on January 21, 1525. And last year all Mennonites in America recalled the Bicentennial of the United States. What do these anniversary events say about our view of the past and our vision for the future?

The 1874 event which many of us celebrated in a year-long cultural and religious festival was an event of ethnic Mennonite history. It recalled the migration of a group of Russian Mennonites to North America who came for both noble and ignoble reasons, although, as can so easily happen, our romanticized remembrance of that history tended to stress the good and overlook the not-so-good. We planned and shaped our centennial observance as a massive and continuous cultural-religious extravaganza because we, together with other ethnic Mennonites, are hungry for our roots. We want to know where we have come from. We are losing our ethnic shame and beginning to feel good about being Mennonite. "Mennonite is beautiful." After centuries of inferiority feelings we have experienced a moment of liberation (thanks in part to similar movements among other minority peoples) that says "ethnic peculiarity is beautiful."

So we celebrated: we read, talked, ate, toured, looked and laughed. We affirmed ourselves as we are. We are the descendants of a great and good people. Therefore, it follows, we are good. And because we are good our ways are good. We celebrated, but we did not feel the need to re-

pent and change. We felt we did not have to repent and change because the event we were recalling in ethnic history did not call for such a radical response.

But it is different with January 21, 1525. That date marks a major event in Christian history and in western religious-political history. On that day a new understanding of faith and church was born which shook western Europe and which changed the shape of modern civilization. But we hardly acknowledged that major event 450 years later in 1975. We alluded to it, but we did not celebrate it. Why? Perhaps it was because January 21, 1525, calls us to repentance and new vision rather than celebration.

The 450th anniversary of the founding of Anabaptism judges all forms of Christian ethnicity and calls for rebirth of a radical faith and church that is true to Jesus and the New Testament. We celebrated our ethnicity in 1974, but we tended to deny a hearing to our own history's call for radical Christian commitment in 1975.

What was this Anabaptist movement all about?

First of all, *it was a Jesus movement*. Anabaptism meant a profound commitment to take Jesus seriously in everyday life. Christianity was defined as discipleship, following Jesus in His life, death and resurrection.

This definition of Christian faith ran counter to two contemporary understandings of the meaning of Jesus. The first asserted that the demands of Jesus were too difficult for ordinary people to carry out. Therefore, only specially elect—the clergy—were expected to take Jesus' life and teachings seriously while the masses were free of that obligation. The second delimited Jesus' significance to providing heavenly salvation, but regarded His earthly life as irrelevant for Christians. Jesus did something for people that could be described theologically as "justification" but that "justification" made no demands on the way one lived in the world.

The Anabaptists rejected these understandings of Chris-

tian faith. They refused to distinguish between Christian faith and morality. For them there was no faith and no church without following Christ in everyday life. The life and teachings of Jesus were the clue to the shape of the Christian life and church. Jesus was the model.

Another way of saying this is that the Anabaptist movement was rooted in the Synoptic Gospels, not the Old Testament or Paul. It was supremely a movement for the recovery of Jesus and His kingdom as the center of faith and church. Out of this fundamental conviction emerged a Christian ethic characterized by love and nonresistance, the simple life, economic sharing, personal and churchly discipline, etc.

The Anabaptist commitment to Jesus as the center of faith also resulted in a new understanding of the Bible. For the reformers the total Bible was taken as one flat book. Every text had the same kind of authority regardless of its place and purpose in the biblical tradition. Thus the state church and war could be justified out of the Old Testament without reference to what Jesus and the early Christians said about kingship and lordship, violence and war.

The Anabaptists in contrast made a clear distinction between the Old Testament and the New. They read the Bible as the story of God's movement for and among His people which reached its high point in the life and work of Jesus, and which sees His continuing work in the life of His disciple community. Jesus was the "canon" through which they read the rest of the Bible. There is an old and a new covenant. They read the old in terms of its goal, Christ. They read the new as the fulfillment of the promise.

This understanding of the Bible had enormous consequences for life and faith. It was the foundation stone for the Anabaptist understanding of nonresistance, rejection of oaths, believers baptism, separation of church and state, and many others.

Secondly, *the Anabaptist movement was a believers*

church movement. That means, very simply in outline form, that the Anabaptists understood the church in terms of the following five characteristics:

1. The Church is composed of voluntary adult believers. Anabaptism meant human choice is taken very seriously. In a context where people were assumed to be Christian by birth and environment, the Anabaptists articulated and practiced a high view of voluntary personal responsibility. Discipleship was a matter of free, personal adult decision. No one could make that decision for anyone else, and no coercion could be used in forcing a faith decision.

2. The church is a discerning brotherhood. Anabaptism meant the church is the covenant community of discerning brothers, not simply the place where the word is properly preached and the sacraments properly observed (Luther's definition). The faith decision did not simply rescue one from evil for heaven, but incorporated one into the community of disciples. The real and symbolic expression of this living fellowship was the frequent practice of the Lord's Supper. The prerequisite to the observance of the Lord's Supper was the practice of spiritual discipline based on Matthew 18. The church celebrates its oneness with her Lord because she had discerned that she was one in faith and life. The church experienced such oneness because she had discerningly dealt with sin in her midst, supportively strengthened the weak, and encouraged the strong.

For all wings of the Anabaptist movement this understanding of church included the economic dimension of life. Anabaptism meant the community of goods in one of two forms: the common purse in the practice of full economic community or the willing and joyful sharing of personal property with the brotherhood in case of personal or corporate need.

3. The church is a visible counterculture. Anabaptism meant the church was a visible community distinct from the larger society and the state. The church had one Lord and one loyalty. That singular loyalty to Jesus as Lord

called for a critical stance of the church over against all social and political powers that make claims of loyalty on men. Christ and Caesar, church and state, stand in opposition to each other because each make fundamentally contradictory claims for loyalty.

This understanding of the church's relation to society and the state was so liberating in the 16th century, and subsequent centuries, that the churches of the Anabaptist movement were labeled as "Free Churches." The connotations of this label are very significant. The church understood itself as free from state control and support, as a culturally free church which stood above political and economic identities, and as an ideologically free church. The citizenship of disciples was in heaven, not in a political/economic system which shaped the loyalty and life style of the church in the world.

4. The church is missionary. Anabaptism meant a missionary church because the church was the body of voluntarily committed believers living together in tension with the prevailing society. If infants are baptized and if all citizens of the state are viewed as Christian there is no need for evangelism. On these assumptions the church perpetuates itself. But if the church is limited to those who have freely confessed the lordship of Christ, then the survival of the church depends on evangelism in every generation. It is precisely because the Anabaptists rejected both infant baptism and the marriage of church and state that they defined the church as missionary and considered all of Europe their mission field. The great commission was the responsibility of every Christian because no one was automatically assumed to be Christian.

The missionary nature of the church was rooted in an understanding of the church as a minority movement in society. The church can be missionary only if it is a prophetic minority. When the church no longer sees itself as a missionary minority it has become identified with the citizens and powers of the state. Precisely that identifica-

tion represents the fall of the church, which the Anabaptists believed occurred under Constantine in the 4th century, and from which they sought to restore the New Testament understanding of the church.

5. The church is the New Testament church. Anabaptists meant to be New Testament Christians. The intention of the Anabaptist movement was to restore the life of the church according to the New Testament patterns. This restoration movement was not naive. It was concerned that the New Testament be taken as authoritative in whatever is clearly taught by precept or example. The Anabaptists did not insist that everything in the life of the church must be done exactly as it was done in the New Testament. But they did object to notions which said that things must be done differently from the early church.

In summary, Anabaptism meant Christian radicalism; that is, it called for a return to the root. That root was defined as Jesus' life and teachings, and a believers church that was composed of those who have voluntarily covenanted with Christ and each other to live as discerning and missionary brothers in tension with the world but in harmony with the New Testament.

What does Anabaptism mean for the 20th century Mennonite Brethren church?

Anabaptism is not a rigid model for us to follow. To treat it that way would deny its intention. But it is a powerful and radical witness to the incarnation of the Word of God in one epoch of history which calls all Christians (especially those who claim to be its descendants) to a similar fleshing out of New Testament faith and life in our times.

Except for the problem of ethnicity the issues facing us are not different from those which confronted the 16th century Anabaptists. Then as now *the great temptation* is Christianized conformity to a pagan or secular society. Then as now *the great obstacle* to real renewal is the confusion of church and society. Then as now *the internal*

test for renewal in the church is whether there can be, as John Howard Yoder says, "a redemptive yet binding personal discipline, and whether it can include the economic realm." Then as now *the external test* of the church's faithfulness is "her moral independence of the state and her rejection of war, and whether she has a missionary method and motivation."¹

To be Anabaptist-New Testament we must be willing to become a Jesus movement once again. Jesus must become more than savior from sin and ticket to heaven. He must become the moral norm of our personal, social, and churchly life.

To be Anabaptist-New Testament we must be willing to become a believers church movement once again. Our definition of church will have to move from sanctuary preaching and worship to covenanting brotherhood. Our preoccupation with conformity to the prevailing American middle-class culture will need to be transformed into a nonconformist stance. Our model of being the church will have to change from what other Protestant and evangelical churches are doing to what the New Testament church did. That's a long journey, but all renewal movements involve travel of great distances.

Finally, to be Anabaptist we will have to let January 21, 1525 stand in judgment over both August 16, 1874 and July 4, 1776. Present Mennonite ethnicity, including Mennonite Brethren ethnicity, must not be identified with Anabaptism, or viewed as the faithful expression of it in the 20th century. To be Anabaptist necessitates the rejection of ethnicity as in any way determining Christian faith and faithfulness. Our 16th century forefathers recognized the basic contradiction between the emphasis on ethnicity and the missionary nature of the church.

It is unfortunate that the emphasis on ethnicity which the 16th century Anabaptists rejected has become a special hallmark of their descendants. For a non-ethnic to become a member of a Mennonite Brethren church and a leader in

the conference implies the contradiction of accepting a totally different ethnic identity as well. It is little wonder that many non-ethnic seekers felt alienated by the 1974 centennial celebrations.

Similarly, present Mennonite identification with contemporary American or Canadian nationalism and civil religion, whether symbolized by the American Bicentennial or the Montreal Games in Canada, must be critiqued by those who wish to be Anabaptist in the last quarter of the 20th century. Our forebearers sacrificed their lives because they rejected the nation state and its self chosen symbols of legitimacy as representing the primary means of doing God's will in the world. To be Anabaptist necessitates rejecting nationalism, which is nothing more than another form of ethnicity, as in any way determining Christian faith and faithfulness. Positively, it calls for the recovery of a clear understanding and incarnation of God's peoplehood in the world.

Anabaptism is not identical with contemporary Mennonite Brethrenism. In many ways it is in serious conflict with it. Therefore, for us to flesh out the New Testament heritage means we must make a choice. We can face the difference between the New Testament vision and present Mennonite Brethren reality and conclude that out of faithlessness to the vision we are no longer Anabaptist-New Testament Christians. Or we can repent and be renewed. That will mean recommitting ourselves to the New Testament vision of faith and church, being judged by it and thereby being justified by it.

We must choose this day which vision will guide our lives.

NOTES

1. John Howard Yoder, "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision," *Concern No. 18: Radical Reformation Reader* (1971), pp. 20-21.

MENNONITE BRETHREN: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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"Mennonite Brethren past, present and future." The topic calls for a post-mortem of the church that was, for a diagnosis of the church that is, and for a prognosis of the church that is to be. It is a task impossible for ordinary mortals. Moreover, the topic implies a definite relationship between prophecy and history. Many preachers read prophecy as pre-recorded history, but it is doubtful whether historians can do something similar and read history as prophecy and make predications for the future on the basis of an historical analysis. On the one hand, it is difficult enough to tell it like it was, and even more so, to tell like it is or like it might be. On the other hand, I fully appreciate the significance of a larger, more comprehensive approach to historical analysis. H. Richard Niebuhr, correctly claims, that all attempts to interpret the past are indirect attempts to understand the present and its future. It is unfortunate that modern existentialism, which has influenced our Christian thinking so much, tends to rob us of both the past and the future. I find that the present Christian experience can become meaningful only in the context of both history and eschatology, in a faith that has both the historical and eschatological dimension. The person who can identify with the past, who can identify not only with the Christ of personal experience but also with the Lord of history, with the God of our fathers, is much better equipped to face a difficult present and an uncertain future.

I would like to consider several aspects of our past and of our present and make some observations about the future of our church. These will be cursory observations; they will be glimpses into the past, present, and future. What I suggest might more accurately be described as reflections of a concerned churchman rather than the

objective analysis of an historian.

I. Mennonite Brethren in the Past

I would like to analyze the past in both positive and negative terms and follow this pattern in looking at the present and the future. What are some of the positive aspects in our past? What are the positive forces that have shaped our history? I begin with what has been repeatedly emphasized and what is a very basic factor in the understanding of our past: that is the practical biblicism that motivated our forefathers and shaped their lives. The M.B. church was born in fellowship centers such as Gnadenfeld and Ohrloff, and these *Brudertums-Kreise*, as they were called, were given to Bible study and prayer. Our early Brethren certainly could be called a "congregation of radical Bible readers." They read the scriptures, not in order to construct a theological system, but to find answers for Christian faith and life. They did not read the Bible in order to revise the Mennonite Confession of Faith but to find some very practical guidelines for the work of the church. We read of the *Biblestunden* which they conducted and of the *Bibelbesprechungen* which they carried on. Wesley Prieb has effectively characterized the early Brethren when he describes them as people who were known by their bulging coat pocket in which they carried a well-worn Bible. Our forefathers have always put the Bible into the center of things and have even institutionalized their biblicism. We have built Bible schools, Bible academies, Bible institutes, Bible colleges and finally a Biblical Seminary. It was important that the word Bible be part of the title in order to give it the proper image; and we have been very reluctant to change it to something different.

A second major factor in our past has been the emphasis on the church as a covenant community. Like their Anabaptist forefathers, the early Brethren could not conceive of the Christian life apart from the fellowship of the believers, the redeemed community. They felt it was a vital

part of the Christian life. They wouldn't have gone as far as Cyprian who taught *Extra ecclesiam, nulla solus*, but they came very close to it. Every believer must belong to the church, to the covenant community. Members made a voluntary commitment to Christ, but they also made a voluntary covenant with one another. This commitment found expression in the name of the association which they formed.

They called their first assembly not "general conference," but the *Bundeskonferenz*, or covenant conference, which was composed of *Bundesgemeinde* (covenant churches). One entered this community of the redeemed by making a baptismal covenant or *Taufbund*. This emphasis on covenant had far-reaching implications for our concept of the church and of the Christian witness. Our Brethren believed in a corporate witness, and there was no provision made to "do your own thing." They felt that they had to come together, and together they tried to comprehend the length and breadth and height and depth of the will of God. Thus we have the strong emphasis on the covenant. Only on such a basis can we be effective in both our Christian ethics and also our Christian witness. We find it increasingly difficult to carry on any church discipline. It is difficult largely because we have lost this concept of a covenant community where we take real responsibility for one another, as the early brethren did. They united to walk according to the same rule and when they found that smoking was a bad habit they agreed not to smoke. Those who didn't agree, were put out of the church. They took a united stand. We find it very difficult today to take a united stand on ethical questions. The ability to do so is important for the maintenance of our corporate witness.

The early brethren also manifested a strong missionary concern. At the first *Bundeskonferenz* held in Andreasfeld, Chortitza, in 1872, they elected one committee and that was for evangelism. At first this evangelism was largely restricted to the immediate community but it later extended

to the regions beyond. In *The Legacy of Faith* Gerhard Lohrenz writes that many of the people from the Mennonite Church joined the new Mennonite movement because they shared this vision for evangelism, especially among the Russian people.

Having noted the strengths of the early movement I would like to point out certain limitations in their understanding of the Christian life and of the Christian community. There was an almost complete internalization of the Christian faith among our early brethren. Every religious movement faces two great dangers. One is the complete internalization of the faith, the other is the complete externalization, where faith becomes a matter of mere form. One sees this especially in later Judaism and also in the Roman Catholic Church. Every church tends to become more formal as it continues to exist. It happened in the Mennonite Church. The reaction was an internalization of Christian experience due largely to the influence of the Pietists on 19th century Mennonitism. This internalization as a corrective to mere formalism and barren orthodoxy is a wholesome thing. It was necessary at the time. But when one experiences God's grace only internally and not in all areas of life, then this eventually results in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." Some of our brethren suffered from this emphasis in earlier years.

Another negative tendency among our brethren of the past was a tendency toward isolationism. Separation from sin was often interpreted as isolation not only from things but from people and even from other believers. We have often been concerned more with the preservation of our faith than with the propagation of the good news and sharing of our faith with others. We have separated ourselves from other Evangelicals and from the larger Mennonite brotherhood.

Closely connected with isolation was an inclination toward legalism. We have defined sin very often in terms of acts rather than in terms of attitudes and disposition. The

Mennonite Brethren pilgrim on his way to Zion could find his way rather easily if he would by-pass certain institutions. If he could avoid the dance hall, the beer parlor, and the movie theater, he was well on his way. This attitude has been unfortunate because the sins of the spirit are much more difficult to overcome than the sins of the flesh. We have often been lopsided in our ethical emphasis.

Moreover, we have in the past also displayed a negative attitude toward culture. Mennonites in general, and Mennonite Brethren in particular, have manifested a certain *Kulturfeindlichkeit*, a certain cultural narrowness, both in education and in the fine arts. Education was often equated with worldly wisdom, and we did not want to become involved in man's philosophy or in worldly wisdom. We have found it increasingly difficult to reconcile Christ and culture, scripture and science. As a result of the *Kulturfeindlichkeit* we have often robbed ourselves of a richer Christian life and of a more effective witness. We have not used cultural tools for an effective propagation of the faith and for sharing our Christian concerns with others. The intellectual horizon of many of our brethren has often been very narrow. A friend told me that when he was pastor of a church in Western Canada composed mostly of rural people, "I find it difficult to really speak to these people and share with them my faith because the only thing they read is the Bible and the Western Producer, a farm paper." Reading little literature or history has permitted us to inhabit a small world.

II. Mennonite Brethren in the Present

The living faith of the dead can become the dead faith of the living. It has happened before; it can happen again. There are trends in our present Mennonite Brethren Church that require our attention. We have reached the stage of almost complete acculturation. Formerly we emphasized isolation from culture, now we rapidly move toward complete conformity to culture. I don't know which is the

greater evil, complete identification or complete isolation from culture. It is difficult to identify Mennonite Brethren outside of the church building. A study of their economic and recreational activities, of their political involvements and their lifestyle, would not give us many criteria to distinguish them from other Canadians or Americans. We are so much like them. This is an indictment. Niebuhr, Miller, and Pauck some years ago wrote a booklet pointing out that the church must be against the world to save the world. There must be tension, there must be non-conformity in lifestyle. We find it difficult to attract people to our churches and to our faith because they see no difference between church and world, and they are indifferent because we are not different.

A second problem in our present Mennonite Brethren Church is our great material affluence. Perhaps the present economic crisis will help us to solve this problem in part and lead us back to a simpler lifestyle. We have moved rather rapidly from the lower class to the middle class and even into the upper economic and cultural class of society. As a brotherhood we have learned to cope with poverty, but have we learned to cope with wealth and affluence? John Kenneth Galbraith, the famous Harvard economist, wrote some years ago that it is much more difficult to deal with affluence than with poverty. Material wealth in our brotherhood can be a source and a potential for great blessing if it is used in the expansion of the Kingdom, but it can also be a great liability and a great curse if it is used for self-indulgence and self-glory. We all know the old saying that piety gives birth to prosperity, and then the mother turns around and devours the child. So often piety is devoured by prosperity.

Another trend that raises concern in the present M.B. Church is a shallow evangelicalism. This shallowness is somewhat related to acculturation. We preach and sing a message that does not disturb people in their comfortable pews. We offer them God's gracious provision, God's peace,

God's forgiveness, without calling them to commitment and Christian discipleship. With a strong emphasis on the vertical relationship of man to God, we have failed to stress the second part of the Great Commandment: thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. A shallow evangelicalism finds expression in our worship services, in a sentimental kind of church music which does not challenge us to action. We are very open to any new fad that comes along. Our roots in theology and history are not deep, and when a new movement comes along we accept the whole package, whether it comes from Campus Crusade, Bill Gothard, or someone else. I am in favor of receiving as much as possible from these movements, but with discernment, with discrimination. We will not retain our identity, we will not be effective in our witness, unless we exercise this discernment.

On the positive side of the ledger there is the churches renewed search for historical and theological identity. Who are we? What is our role and mission in this world? Such questions surface constantly. This symposium has revealed such a concern. In the (Old) Mennonite Church the rediscovery of the Anabaptist vision led to renewal, to reorientation, and to a new interest in service and witness. I trust that this will also be the case in our brotherhood. I find a great interest in our theological and historical roots, especially among college and university students. They are often more interested in our heritage than their fathers and mothers, and this augurs well for the future. There is great concern for historical and theological identity. This interest is expressed by people who have seen the options, who have not been kept in a sheltered brotherhood, but who have become interested again in that which they feel has more depth and meaning than contemporary evangelicalism.

Another hopeful feature is a search for true *Koinonia*, for true fellowship. Our early brethren were very much concerned about true fellowship. We have many members today who are not satisfied with just sitting neatly in rows

during a Sunday morning worship service. There is a desire to enter into each other's lives and to bear each other's burdens. The cells that emerge in many communities, the Bible studies in the homes, are meeting a deep need for more intimate fellowship. During the early years our brethren didn't have any churches but met in private homes. They used the low German language for about twelve years in their services before they changed to high German. This may have also led to a greater formality, and in some instances, to a loss of *Koinonia*.

Further encouragement and hope emerges from today's search for meaningful witness. There is a revival of an early form of evangelism—personal evangelism. The early brethren all came from the laity, there was not an ordained deacon or minister among them, but they were great personal workers. They shared their faith, they were what our brethren used to call *Knogflock-Missionare*, they used to button-hole people and ask them: Are you already a follower of Jesus? Do you know him as your savior? In that way they shared their faith with others. This mode of evangelism appears to be coming back. Lately, we have come to realize that this is possibly the most effective and the most fruitful way to build the church and to expand God's kingdom.

But we also have a new interest in a Christian witness which finds expression in a prophetic voice. We have prided ourselves in the past that we were *die Stillen im Lande* ("the quiet of the land"). But silence can sometimes be criminal silence, especially in view of social, economic, and religious injustice. There is a real need to speak out against social injustice, against discriminations of minority groups, against the violence, war, and materialism of our age. We have a definite prophetic witness to give and there is an increasing concern that we give it now as a part of our total witness to society. There is also a new and increased interest today in practical ministries of love and reconciliation. When I reflect on the last 55 years since MCC came into being, I cannot help but accept this agency as a gift of God

to our present age and to our church of this day. It is the kind of witness that is heard and seen also by people who have no interest in what we preach in our churches. It is an effective witness, and we should thank God for the increased interest in such ministry in our brotherhood.

III. Mennonite Brethren in the Future

Daniel Webster when asked to predict the future history of America said, "I shall do that in five words: rise, prosperity, luxury, decline, fall." History does not need to repeat itself. It's only for people who learn nothing from history that history repeats itself. What are the prospects for the future? There is an increasing polarization of theological perspectives in our brotherhood. We have a left wing and a right wing in our churches. We have a left wing that is very much interested in famine relief and welfare. These people usually identify very closely with the Mennonite Central Committee and with similar agencies. They are also very much interested in a positive peace witness, although occasionally they may drift away from the New Testament basis. In this group there is an emphasis on social services, social action, social concerns—the Christian church must always have that concern. We also have those who feel that this is not a part of the gospel. All they desire is a traditional evangelism, an "old fashioned Gospel." This is coupled usually with a strong emphasis on Christian doctrine, on the fundamentals, on man's vertical relationship to Jesus Christ, but with very little emphasis on the social implications of the Gospel, and on the peace witness. They would much rather identify with militant nationalist Christians than with those who emphasize peace, relief, and social service. Both of these extremes can be dangerous. There need be no serious tension between evangelism and the peace witness. The peace witness has always been a part of the total Gospel. Jesus taught us to observe all he commanded. An over-emphasis of social concerns can lead to a shallow humanism. An over-emphasis on personal

salvation can lead to a barren fundamentalism. It is uncertain which is the greater evil. The two must be kept in proper balance; we must bring the whole gospel to the whole man.

A second concern that needs our attention is the increasing proliferation of our missionary effort. This tends to divide loyalties. Our churches and families are bombarded with appeals from every quarter for help. Many missionary agencies have found that the Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches are a fruitful field which they diligently cultivate. If they can only get into our Mennonite communities they know that they will get financial support because we have a heart for the needy and for the lost. One of our little country churches in Canada at one time supported 13 missionaries, and I don't think one of them served under M.B. missions. In such a church there is very little interest in M.B. mission work. I believe we can make our greatest impact by concentrating our efforts on our own program under our Board of Missions and Services. It is a good program and deserves our whole-hearted support.

What are my hopes for the M.B. Church? I hope that there will be a recovery of the Anabaptist vision of Christian discipleship. I find this the same as New Testament discipleship. Sometimes we hear voices which exhort us to go back to the New Testament and not to the Anabaptist movement. One can understand that. Simultaneously, the Anabaptists made an attempt to realize the New Testament vision. We need to identify with the historical church, and I'd rather identify with the Anabaptists than with the Lutherans or the Reformed of the sixteenth century, although we also can learn very much from the latter. So I hope that there will be a recovery of Christian discipleship, which is just another way of stating that we must have a new commitment to Christ's lordship. It is so easy to drift away from the faith of the scriptures and from the faith of our fathers. Basil Wiley in his book *Christianity: Past and Present* claims

that the first generation of Christians has a deep and profound experience. The second generation has a shadow experience, and the third generation has only the shadow of a shadow. I wonder whether there are not many shadows around us, where there is little evidence of genuine commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of life. Sebastian Frank who turned from Catholicism to Lutheranism noted that as Catholics we were work saints, as Lutherans we became word saints. He found no difference between *Werk-heilige* und *Wort-heilige oder Mundchristen*. We must combine the emphasis on word and on work by emphasizing a new model, and that is the model of discipleship. The Christians of the book of Acts were known as people of "The Way," not people of a certain work. They had a certain lifestyle, they acted and walked in a certain way. We need to become more and more a people of "The Way."

We also need a recovery of the Anabaptist vision of the covenant community. I am rather pessimistic about the future of our church unless we overcome all the centrifugal tendencies, all the tendencies that tear us apart where everyone does his own thing. Unless we can unite again in a covenant community where we share common goals, common aspirations, common hopes, and common programs of action, our total mission program will be undermined and might even collapse. I trust very much that we will unite again as a *Bundeskonferenz*, as a covenant community.

What does the future hold for us? It is as bright as the promises of God for the Mennonite Brethren Church. This hope is not based upon reflections of the past nor on an analysis of the present. I sometimes am a little impatient with the critics of our church who say that unless we become more relevant we will soon be swept under the rug. The church is not of man's making, however. The church is Christ's church, and the promise which inspires our hope is the promise in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." I was again

impressed with this truth when I had the opportunity to visit the Soviet Union and there met Mennonite Brethren who have not had all the props that have sustained and inspired us and that have influenced us in the last 50 years. They have gone through suffering and martyrdom, and God has preserved them. They sometimes wonder whether we are the true church since we live in peace and prosperity. They have experienced persecution and suffering, which puts them into the true "apostolic succession" that we find in the book of Acts. I have hopes for the church because Christ is going to continue to build his church through his Spirit in the renewal of the individual as well as in the renewal of the whole body. By the grace of God the prospects are bright for the Mennonite Brethren Church.

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